

NOVEMBER 2024

AUSTRALIA

PLAYBOY

ADVISOR

PLAYBOY WEIGHS
IN ON READERS'
QUESTIONS ABOUT
SEX AND MORE.

IN HIS DOMAIN

HOW A HUMBLE
SKATEBOARDER
BUILT A
STREETWEAR
EMPIRE!

UNSTOPPABLE
FORCE

Laci Kay Somers
& Jesús Ortiz Paz

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Tech Editor **Peter Wolff**
Illustrations **Toon53 Productions**
Motoring Editor **John Page**
Senior Photo Editor **Luba V Nel**

ADVERTISING SALES **pieter@dhsmedia.co.za**

for more information

PHONE: +27 10 006 0051
MAIL: PO Box 71450, Bryanston, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2021
ADDRESS: First Floor Block 6 Fourways Office Park, Cnr Roos Street & Fourways Boulevard, 2191
EMAIL: info@dhsmedia.co.za
WEB: www.playboymagaaustralia.com
FACEBOOK: facebook.com/Playboy-Australia
INSTAGRAM: [playboy_australia](https://instagram.com/playboy_australia)

PLAYBOY INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHING
Allison Kopcha, Chief Business Development & Licensing
Hazel Thomson, Senior Director, International Licensing

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PLAYBOY

A man with short brown hair and a light beard is sitting at a desk in an office. He is wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a light blue button-down shirt. His arms are crossed, and he is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. He is wearing a watch on his left wrist. The background is a blurred office environment with a computer monitor and some papers on the desk.

FLYING PRIVATE and THE MILE HIGH CLUB

SECRETS OF THE SKY

Alexey Popov is one of the world's most distinguished aviation engineers and pilots, but he is also currently the creator of the World's First Hydrogen-Powered Regional Aircraft. The Sirius Aviation AG jet is a trailblazer in the aerospace sector and revolutionizing air travel as the first hydrogen-powered aircraft that will bring clean air to the skies. While Alexey is a visionary, he has also experienced



a lot while manning the cockpit, and we spoke to him to find out all the 'fun' details and secrets of flying + what you can do yourself to have a seamless flying experience whether you fly private or commercial. And does the autopilot really do all the work?!

Why is flying private so sexy and exclusive these days to people? Aviation has always been enveloped in a certain romance. There's something magical about soaring above the clouds, where the stars feel closer and the moon lights your way. Private flying allows you to fully immerse yourself in this magic—observing the night sky, crossing mountain ranges, and admiring endless ocean views. When the sun rises or sets, painting the sky with breathtaking colors, you feel a special connection with the world. This sense of freedom and unity with nature makes such flights truly special and alluring.

As a pilot yourself, what secrets can you reveal about what really goes on during long flights in the cockpit? Is it true that autopilot technology does most of the work? Yes, the autopilot does about 90% of the heavy lifting, which is its main advantage. It allows the pilot to be less fatigued and reduces the workload at high altitudes. However, that doesn't mean the pilot is idle. During long flights, we're constantly monitoring instruments, controlling indicators, and anticipating any potential issues like weather changes, turbulence, or technical failures. One of the secrets is the importance of preparation and endurance. For example, when I flew across the Atlantic Ocean in a

single-engine piston aircraft, the Cirrus SR22, it took me six days. In such conditions, proper nutrition is crucial—small but high-calorie meals, as there's no restroom on small planes, and stops for refueling are every 5–6 hours. In the cockpit, pilots converse, discuss life situations, and share ideas, but always with attention to their duties. We're constantly monitoring instrument readings and preparing for any possible scenarios. It requires concentration and professionalism but also creates a special sense of camaraderie and mutual understanding.

Where have been some of your most favorite spots to travel to and fly into? I absolutely love flying over the majestic mountains of Switzerland, where snowy peaks touch the clouds and create breathtaking landscapes. Flights over the ocean, especially over Greenland and the Caribbean Sea, give an indescribable feeling of freedom and vastness. Night flights and daytime journeys through clouds are special moments when the world looks entirely different from a bird's-eye view. Sometimes I descend to get a closer look at the Amazon jungle or uninhabited islands places full of mystery and natural beauty. Flying over major island cities like Hong Kong is also impressive with their bright lights and dynamic architecture. However, what's equally important is who you share these experiences with. Flying in the company of friends or loved ones makes each journey special. Sharing emotions and marveling at the scenery together adds depth and unforgettable impressions to the flight.

Have you ever had a "close call" in a dangerous way while flying? Yes, I've had an experience that made me quite nervous. I was flying from Duluth, Minnesota the place where Cirrus SR22 aircraft are manufactured to Happy Valley-Goose Bay in Canada. It was the night of September 5, 2019. Suddenly, a severe storm began with a crosswind of 64 knots. We found ourselves midway through the route without radio communication with ground services since there's no coverage in that area. The air traffic there is minimal, so contacting other aircraft wasn't possible either.

I faced a tough decision: return to the departure airport or continue onward. If the wind had shifted to a headwind, on a small aircraft like the Cirrus SR22, we could have practically stalled in the air, as the plane's speed is comparable to the speed of the opposing wind. At the same time, there was no guarantee that turning back would be safer since we didn't know which part of the storm we were in. The weather radar couldn't provide accurate information as there were no clouds or other clear signs of the storm just strong wind and an emerging hurricane. I decided to continue the flight, and fortunately, everything turned out well. The flight lasted 5.5 hours and went smoothly, but this experience reminded me of the importance of being prepared for unforeseen circumstances and

maintaining composure in challenging situations.

How did the idea to innovate and create the first hydrogen-powered regional aircraft come to be? The idea came to me during one of my transatlantic flights. Flying over the majestic expanses of Greenland, I was struck by the purity and beauty of our planet: snow-white glaciers, endless horizons, and breathtaking landscapes. This experience made me deeply consider the need to preserve this natural harmony for future generations. As an engineer, I've been studying materials and research on the impact of emissions on the environment and realized how polluted our planet is becoming. Aware of the scale of the problem, I felt an overwhelming desire to contribute to solving this global issue. My team of engineers and I began exploring available technologies capable of providing zero emissions in aviation. After analyzing various options, we concluded that hydrogen fuel is the most promising direction. Some necessary technologies were already available, while others required time and additional development. Today, all these technologies exist on the market, and we're actively working on creating a hydrogen-powered aircraft. Our goal is to significantly reduce aviation's carbon footprint and preserve the beauty of our planet as I often see it from the sky. This aspiration inspires us to continue innovating and promoting environmentally friendly solutions in the aviation industry.

For those who don't know, what makes your jets different from others? Our aircraft represent a revolution in aviation thanks to several key features:

- Zero Emissions: We use pure hydrogen as fuel,

ensuring no harmful emissions into the atmosphere. Hydrogen is the most abundant element in the universe and can be produced virtually anywhere on the planet. The technologies for obtaining and generating hydrogen are already available and continue to develop actively, becoming more economical.

- Cost Efficiency: Operating costs for our aircraft are significantly lower compared to traditional aircraft. A full tank of hydrogen for a flight distance of 1,100 miles costs less than \$200, with the pure fuel cost being around \$170. This is approximately 4-5 times cheaper than aviation fuel expenses, thanks to hydrogen's high energy efficiency.

- Safety: Our aircraft are equipped with an emergency safety system—the Hull Ballistic Recovery System. In the event of a critical system failure, a parachute deploys to ensure a safe landing and save everyone on board.

- Simplicity and Reliability: The aircraft has only one moving part—the impeller. Fewer moving parts mean increased reliability and a lower likelihood of failures. This also simplifies maintenance and reduces operating costs.

- Vertical Takeoff and Landing: With the ability for vertical takeoff and landing, our aircraft don't require busy airports or long runways. They can take off and land almost anywhere, like helicopters, greatly expanding their functionality and convenience. Our goal is to make aviation more environmentally friendly, accessible, and safe by offering innovative solutions that change the way we think about flying.

A lot of celebrities have been getting bad press due to the amount of flying they do that is harming the environment. When will your jets be ready for them to use instead? We're doing everything possible to bring our aircraft to the market as quickly as possible. All our team's and partners' resources are focused on achieving this goal. We plan to begin deliveries of the first aircraft by the end of 2028. This means that by December 2028, the first customers will be able to experience the joy of using our eco-friendly jets. Our main task is to accelerate the development and certification process to provide an environmentally safe aviation solution in the shortest possible time.

We have to ask... will there be room on your jets for people to get frisky?! Is that a real thing with airlines in your experience? Humans have





always been drawn to romance, and for many, it's a natural inclination. Of course, we consider this when designing our aircraft. I'll let you in on a little secret: we've taken this into account in the aircraft's design and interior, ensuring that our clients can truly enjoy all the delights of romantic flights. As designers, we have to think about a wide variety of scenarios, including those related to comfort and privacy. We've integrated solutions that allow passengers to feel as cozy and free as possible, so they can fully immerse themselves in the atmosphere of the flight and share these special moments with their companions.

Back to being professional here, you also recently announced that you are developing zero-emission airports. Tell us more about this! We're excited to announce our collaboration with Marathon Group, a well-known Australian company with whom we've signed a partnership agreement. At this time, we can't disclose the project's details due to a non-disclosure agreement (NDA). However, I can say that we're working on creating the first-of-their-kind zero-emission airports that will significantly differ from traditional ones. Our plans include implementing innovative technical and technological solutions that will transform the concept of airports. We're aiming to integrate cutting-edge technologies and unconventional approaches to make these airports not only environmentally friendly but also more efficient and convenient for passengers and operators. Our team and partners are focused on bringing the boldest ideas to life and creating infrastructure that meets future demands. We eagerly await the moment when we can share more detailed information about this exciting project.

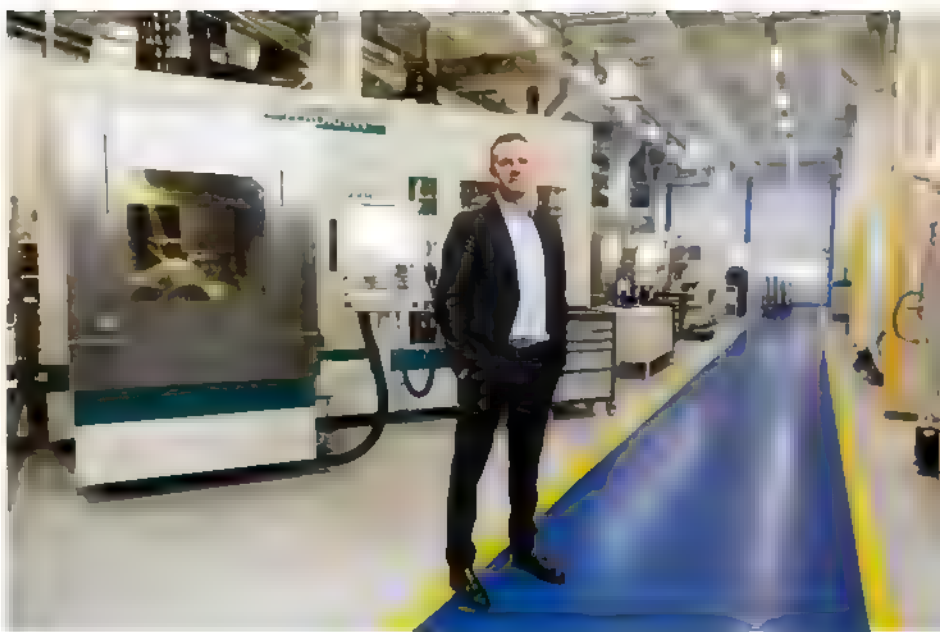
What top five tips would you give people who want to have a seamless flying experience wherever they go? My tips for a flawless flight are as follows.

1. **Carefully Choose Your Airline and Onboard Services:** Whether you're traveling on regular flights or charters, it's important to pay attention to the airline's reputation, offered services, and cost. Read reviews, familiarize yourself with additional options, and choose what suits your needs and expectations. Personal experience is the best way to ensure you've made the right choice, so don't be afraid to try something new.

2. **Plan Your Time in Flight:** Decide in advance how you'll spend your time onboard. It could be watching a movie you've long wanted to see, reading a book, or simply relaxing. Use the flight time to engage in something pleasant or useful that you've been postponing in daily life.

3. **Travel with Good Company.** Flying with loved ones—whether it's your significant other, friends, or family—makes the journey more enjoyable and memorable. The atmosphere onboard largely depends on the company you're with. Shared experiences and conversations add a special mood to your travel.

4. **Choose Inspiring Destinations.** The place you're heading to affects your mood even before arrival. Try



to choose unique or long-desired locations that bring you joy and anticipation. Booking special hotels or visiting new attractions will add vivid impressions.

1. **Select a Flight Time That Suits You:** If possible, opt for early morning or late-night flights. For me, such flights have a special atmosphere and evoke pleasant feelings. You might also enjoy the tranquility and calmness of these hours.

2. **And finally, when not flying or working on aircraft, what do you like to do?** When I'm not working or flying, I still find myself thinking about the aircraft industry and its future. Honestly, I don't know why, but aviation constantly occupies my thoughts. I'm passionate about everything related to it or surrounding it. Aviation isn't just a profession for me; it's a passion that inspires and motivates me every day. It ignites in me a desire for innovation and a drive to make flights even more perfect and accessible. So even in my free time, I continue to explore, read, and dream about what the future of aviation holds.



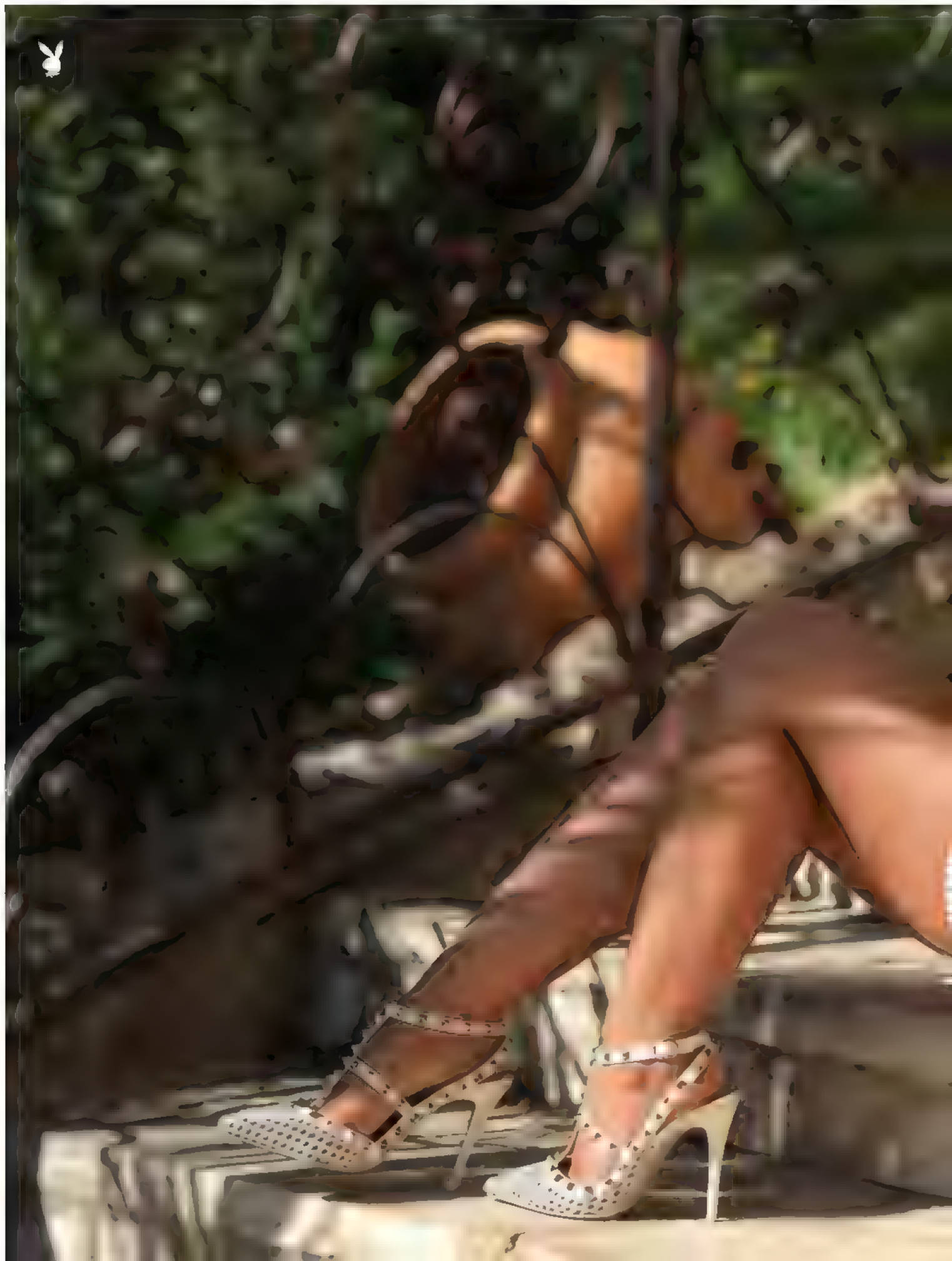




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ELIZABETH

Mode @bunni.erin

Photography by **Mike Cohen** | @mikecohenphotos
MUA **Stephanie Emma** | @stephanieemma.makeupartist
Management **Lord Gargamon**









Could you tell us a bit about yourself?

I come from a pretty diverse background. My dad is Japanese and my mother's side is European. I'm originally from Southern California but I have lived in a number of amazing cities like Chicago and New Orleans. I love yoga, and all sports, and my passion is cooking.

Can you give us a background on your modeling career and where it all started?

I wouldn't call modeling my career, but I have always been a fan of Playboy. I love Playboy's history and everything it represents. It was a dream come true to shoot with Playboy and an experience I'll never forget.

What's your favorite quote that you'd like to share with your fans?

"A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives" Jackie Robinson

Tell us what kind of music you find yourself typically listening to?

I love music! You can find me listening to classical music while I'm cooking or singing my heart out to oldies or R&B! I love music with beats when I'm working out or running.

Do you have any hidden talents, if so what is it?

A few years ago, I got into to sculpting and I love it! My medium is clay, and I have a pretty wide range of things I can sculpt! From a bird bath to a bust of someone's face.

In what ways do you use your platform to inspire or influence others?

I have always been vocal about the importance of living life to the fullest and not letting the constraints of society dictate what you do or how you live. You only live once, make it count.



Do you have any pets? If so, tell us about them. I do! I love animals! I have 3 dogs and 2 cats! They have so much personality and probably a little too much power over me.

How did you prepare mentally for this photoshoot?

I have a great support system of friends and family who have been so encouraging throughout this entire process. The photographer, Mike Cohen is amazing to work with and everyone there made me feel so special. It was one of the greatest experiences of my life.

What is your ideal way to spend a day?

I just love to be with my family and friends. My loved ones are everything to me. It doesn't matter where I am or what I'm doing, as long as I'm surrounded by people I love, I'm happy.

What's your most memorable travel experience?

A few years ago, I traveled to Egypt and saw the pyramids and climbed Mount Sinai. It was the most amazing experience. Watching the sunrise from the summit of Mount Sinai was beyond words.

If you were stranded on a deserted island with only one accessory, what would it be?

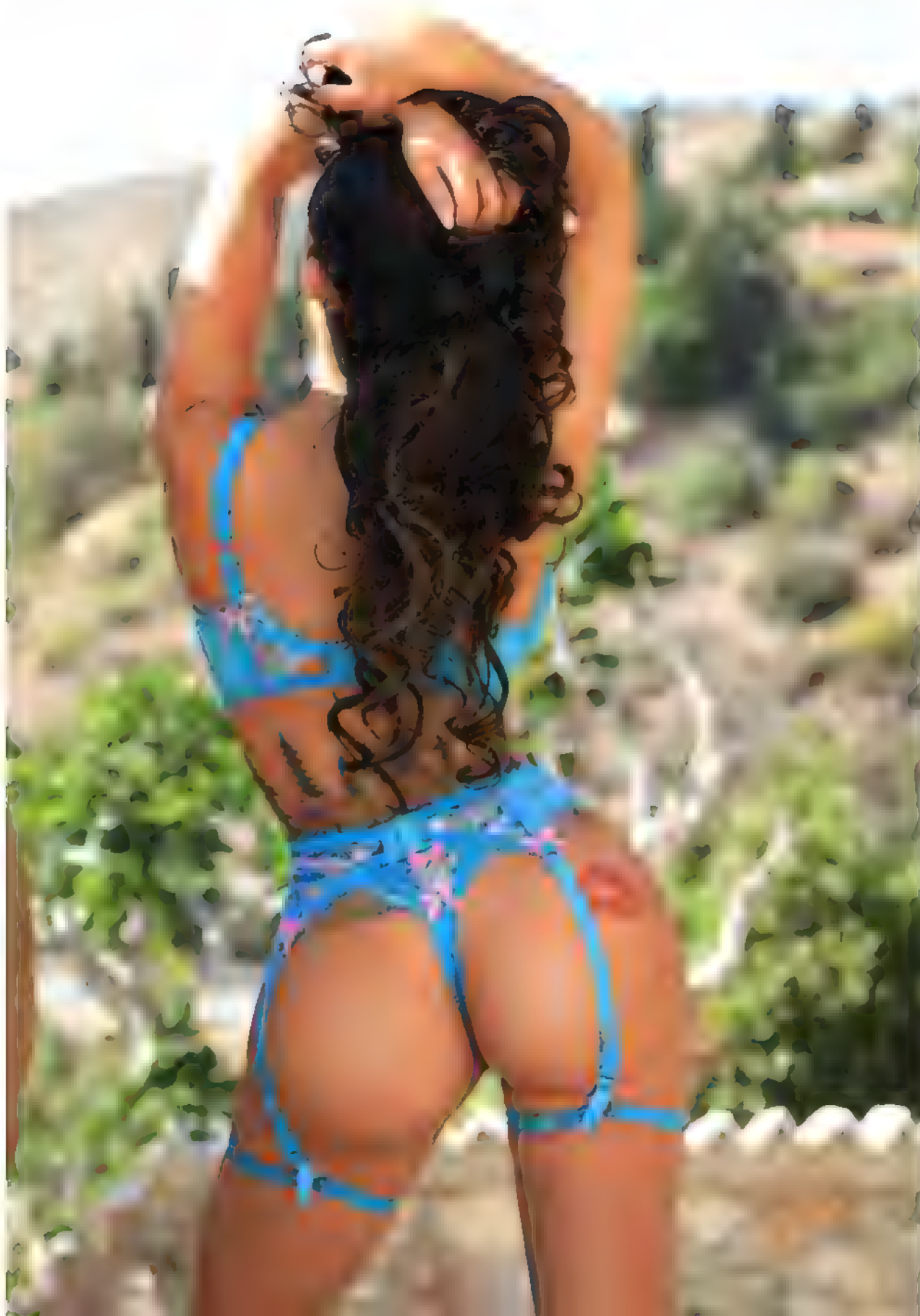
I would hope for a satellite phone.

What's your go-to guilty pleasure snack?

Cheetos. ... I love my snackeroos.

Thanks for taking the time to speak to us, do you have any last words or advice for our readers?

Always remember... The most important thing isn't the journey or the destination. It's the company.







NEW YORK



YORK

New York City is recognized the world-over and it's a truly splendid place to visit with its contemporary living standards and its broad and ever-increasing cultural diversity of residents. What's not to love? NYC packs more to see and do into one compact area than any other place on earth. Here, you'll get to experience the best of both worlds, man and nature, with some naturally beautiful scenery like those found at Central Park or the breathtaking views over the city from one of the numerous skyscrapers - all combined with the modern bustle and experiences of modern city living. Technically, the New York City region is comprised of five boroughs all conveniently placed where the Hudson River meets the Atlantic Ocean. Each borough is unique and diverse with its own roster of must-see destinations, adventures, landmarks, great restaurants, cultural hot spots and unforgettable day and night activities.

DID YOU KNOW?

THE CITY GOT ITS FAMOUS NICKNAME HORSE RACING

THE COMMON TERM "BIG APPLE" WAS USED TO
DESCRIBE A BIG MONEY PRIZE AT IMPAORTANT
HORSE RACES HELD AROUND THE CITY.



DID YOU KNOW?

THE FIRST TAXIS WERE ORIGINAL RED AND GREEN

THESE WERE THE COLORS OF THE OFFICIAL TAXI OPERATOR IN THE EARLY 1900S. THE COMMON COLOR YELLOW WAS ONLY ADOPTED IN 1912.

The epicenter of this great city has to be the Manhattan area, not just because it's very central but because it captures the look and feel of New York City, almost like it's the heart of NYC. Manhattan is a densely populated city-slash-residential area that's a buzzing nod of activity and as such Manhattan is highly regarded as an extraordinary place that's well-known for its world-class facilities which are considered in high-esteem amongst the world's major commercial, financial and cultural centers. A few of Manhattan's iconic landmarks include majestic skyscrapers such as the Empire State Building and the easy-but-busy sprawling Central Park. Other notable places include the Broadway theater which is conveniently located amongst the neon lights of Times Square which is also a great place to visit your local pub for a drink or catch a tasty slice of pizza! The Brooklyn Bridge connects Manhattan to the borough of Brooklyn, where there's a variety of neighborhoods that span across cultures and economic profiles from Williamsburg - a hotbed of indie music, art and nightlife - to beachfront Coney Island and its amusement parks. In New York City there's truly something for everyone to enjoy.

Other locations to visit on your next trip through New York City should include Queens which is home to Flushing Meadows Corona Park, with its 12-story 1964 World's Fair globe sculpture, the Unisphere. Then there's the Bronx, NYC's northernmost borough which is most notably known as the home of underground hip-hop but that's not all, it's also home to the landmark New York Botanical Garden and the internationally renowned Bronx Zoo. The Staten Island Ferry links Manhattan to NYC's southernmost borough with stunning views of the city skyline and the Statue of Liberty. Although the inner-city doesn't seem like the first one of the places that springs to mind when you're picturing an ideal vacation, New York City actually has a lot to offer the exploring heart. There are great and plentiful things to do, from visiting museums and the Statue of Liberty to checking out some of their magnificent views from the Empire State building - or simply just catching a ride along the Brooklyn Bridge. A trip to New York City is the experience of a lifetime with famous attractions like Times Square, Central Park, the Empire State Building and Yankee Stadium - to name just a few.





THE 9/11 MEMORIAL AND MUSEUM

It's not just a museum but a piece of history that endeavors to commemorate the September 11, 2001 attacks, which killed 2,977 people, and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Here visitors will get to witness some life-changing events and hear testimonies as you reflect on what it meant, and how it changed the fight for freedom and liberty. If history and discovering modern heritage is your thing then this is a definite must-do. Be sure to buy yourself a souvenir so you can take home a few memories of your own.

Visit 911memorial.org for more information

NEW YORK CITY HELICOPTER TOURS

Why not see it from above, all at once? Now you can experience the best views of New York City from inside the warmth and safety of a helicopter complete with large floor-to-ceiling convex windows. The great thing about flying is you'll have the chance to take it all in with stunningly beautiful views over Central Park, the Hudson River, and New York Harbor, including the Intrepid Sea Air Space Museum. But that's not all, you'll also get to cruise past the Rockefeller Center, Empire State Building, the World Financial Center, and the Chrysler Building, as well as the iconic Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, Greenwich Village, South Street Seaport, and the 126-year-old Brooklyn Bridge. Talk about an action-packed tour that'll have you interested every single moment from lift-off to landing. Tours include expert narration so you'll learn a few new things and you'll be able to ask your guide questions along the way. So, what's stopping you? Nothing!

Visit getyourguide.com for more information



HARBOR LIGHTS NIGHT CRUISE

New York City is an awesome place to experience things at any time of the day, so why not experience some of New York at sunset on a 2-hour cruise of the harbor. Here, you'll get to take in all the sights and lights of Manhattan aboard a climate-controlled boat built for comfort and sophistication. This is definitely an experience to share with others so take your friends, family, and colleagues and embark on a truly memorable adventure of the harbor with "Lady Liberty" keeping a close watch! With a drink in your hand, purchased from the fully stocked bar, feel the breeze on your face and be mesmerized by the shimmering skyline. Get endless photo opportunities to make you an Instagram star as you sail past legendary attractions such as the Statue of Liberty getting you perfect views of the Freedom Tower - One World Trade Center, Empire State Building, Pier 54 (Titanic Pier), Battery Park and more. See where millions of immigrants were processed when they arrived in America at Ellis Island, cruise past Governors Island, the South Street Seaport and Brooklyn Bridge. Get unrivaled views of the Manhattan Bridge, Williamsburg Bridge, and the Chrysler Building, and discover the East Village, United Nations Building and USS Intrepid Pier from a different perspective. Download the Skyline Navigator App to your personal device before you set sail to enhance your cruise experience with audio and written commentary in English, Chinese, French, Spanish, German, Italian and Portuguese. Talk about the perfect tour!

Visit gocity.com for more information

DID YOU KNOW?

THE HISTORY OF THE STATUE OF LIBERTY

THE ICONIC STATUE ORIGINALLY ARRIVED IN 350 PIECES ALL PACKED IN 214 CRATES. INTERESTINGLY, THE ARM HOLDING THE FLAME ARRIVED A DECADE EARLY AND WAS PUT ON DISPLAY TO HELP RAISE FUNDS FOR THE PROJECT.





EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

There are more awesome New York City tours on offer and another eye-catcher from getyourguide.com is the Empire State Building. Depending on the option selected, you can skip the ticket line with a General Ticket or skip all the lines with the Express Ticket - available online. The Express Ticket also includes a flexible date feature allowing you to visit whenever within 1 month of your scheduled ticket date. You can plan your visit around the weather when you are in New York. Your entrance also includes a unique downloadable multimedia experience that is available in nine languages. The app also includes videos, image galleries, quizzes, and maps showing nearby points of interest. The New Empire State Building Experience not only gives you access to the legendary New York City landmark, allowing you to soar 1,054 foot (320 meters) high and enjoy magnificent 360-degree open-air views of New York City and beyond. If there ever was a top three places to see in New York City, the Empire State Building would definitely be one of them.

Visit getyourguide.com for more information.

DID YOU KNOW?

THE OLDEST BUILDING WAS BUILT IN 1642

IT WAS CALLED THE WYCKOFF FARM, A BROOKLYN HOUSE THAT WAS ORIGINALLY BUILT IN THE 1640S BY A FORMER INDENTURED SERVANT.

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
EVENING TOUR

ies of one of the world's most visited

ential pieces of art that I
form and evolving forms of
ou enjoy the company
museum offers
wide selected





THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE & DUMBO

For many years, the Brooklyn Bridge has been a popular spot for photographers and sightseers alike. The bridge's iconic towers and suspension cables are a sight to behold, and the view of the Manhattan skyline from the bridge is simply breathtaking. The bridge is also a great place to take a walk or a jog, and there are many restaurants and shops nearby. The Brooklyn Bridge is a must-see attraction in New York City, and it's a great place to take a family walk or a romantic stroll. The bridge is also a great place to take a photo, and there are many photo opportunities as you traverse the Brooklyn Bridge. The Brooklyn Bridge is a great place to take a walk or a jog, and there are many restaurants and shops nearby. The Brooklyn Bridge is a must-see attraction in New York City, and it's a great place to take a family walk or a romantic stroll. The bridge is also a great place to take a photo, and there are many photo opportunities as you traverse the Brooklyn Bridge.

Visit getyourguide.com for more information.

DID YOU KNOW?

THERE ARE OVER 100
LANGUAGES SPOKEN IN NEW YORK CITY.

THIS IS MANHATTAN

DIVERSE CULTURES AND
COMMUNITIES WHICH HAVE
MADE THE CITY A WORLD.

Never before in the history of the world have so many people been willing to pay for the right to see a work of art. The art world has exploded, and it is no longer just a niche market. It is a global phenomenon. The art world has exploded, and it is no longer just a niche market. It is a global phenomenon. The art world has exploded, and it is no longer just a niche market. It is a global phenomenon.

FACE-TO-FACE WITH

TORO Y



MOI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANCY GANT

The multitalented musician rode the crest of chillwave, then dove head-first into exploring creativity and the joy of connection

BY **ANDREA DOMANICK**

"Wanna go up on the roof?" Chaz Bear asks me with a puckish grin

His gusto catches me off guard. It has been a long day here at Company, the art studio and record label that Bear, otherwise known as experimental music act Toro y Moi, founded in Oakland, California. Last night he was here producing new music till five A.M., only to return hours later for a packed itinerary that includes being photographed, filmed and interviewed

by **PLAYBOY**. As he heads into the last portion (it's now near sunset), Bear's energy hasn't wavered, and he's eager for me to see more of his world

Reaching up, he pops a heavy circular access door installed above industrial pipes. A column of light pours in and bathes the rear of Company's second-floor recording studio. The opening, barely wider than his shoulders, resembles a submarine escape hatch. Passing through it requires some skilled scrambling between a ladder and a metal power box on the

wall. Bear ascends, his legs dangling comically before he hoists himself up

"You coming?" he asks, flashing that same grin. There's no knowing what lies above. But because Bear is a virtuoso, his creative exploits have positioned him as one of today's most daring and inspired cross-platform artists, chasing him into the sunset is a welcome pursuit.

...

A decade has passed since Bear, now 32, breached pop-cultural consciousness as Toro y Moi, a solo project birthed in a dorm room by a South Carolina raised skater misfit who loved J Dilla and Panda Bear. The hypnagogic pop sound and anxiously lackadaisical disposition of his 2010 debut LP, *Causers of This*, earned him a cult following and helped usher in a rapidly hyped musical movement called chillwave — a microgenre marked by nostalgia, escapism and glazed resignation. The embrace of chillwave and its theme of youthful abandonment was no doubt bolstered by 2008's fraught climate of recession and high unemployment.

But chillwave's star burned hot and fast, eventually cooling in the face of early-2010s hipster malaise. In retrospect, even if Toro y Moi is considered a progenitor of the genre, the association discounts the stylistically omnivorous explorations of his succeeding eight studio albums, two mixtapes and three EPs — releases fueled not by trends but by his

love for exploration.

Today, Toro y Moi is just one facet of Chaz Bear, an artist whose imagination is central to his holistic identity and whose accomplishments read more like career-test results than a boilerplate biography. He's Chazwick Bradley Bear, né Bundick — singer, songwriter, producer, graphic designer, painter and album-cover artist; founder of Company Records, DJ and purveyor of dance music as Les Sins, collaborator with Travis Scott, Flying Lotus and Tyler, the Creator (among others); honoree of "Chaz Bundick Day" as bestowed by Berkeley's mayor; and workaholic by his own admission.

"I noticed that before my work got to where it is now, I was seeking pleasure in the creative process, in the genres I was seeking to re-create," Bear tells me. "The romance has shifted from the creative part to the enjoyment of people's expressions."

That shift is a hallmark of Toro y Moi's latest, this year's *Outer Peace*. The album not only marks Toro y Moi's sharpest stylistic turn yet — slinky R&B production, electronic dance beats and wide-eyed storytelling — it's also a thematic examination of Bear himself and his belief that one's artistic energy and potential are bound to the connections we share with the world around us

...

Back on Company's rooftop: "Sometimes, on a clear day without all the fog, you can see the Golden Gate," Bear says, gesturing in the haze. Contrary to my expectations, the roof — an expanse of tar paper and stucco strewn with bottle caps — is unremarkable. What is remarkable is what surrounds it. The cascading hills of Berkeley and Kensington are to the northeast. A BART train careers by, the grid of residential Oakland beams in the low sun and peaks of construction protrude into the San Francisco skyline.

Surrounded by almost a dozen studios in this industrial arts complex, Company's patch of roof suggests humility. For Bear, it's an improvised island of escape from the mental and emotional grind below.

"This is just another normal day here at Company — this kind of thing, these people around," Bear says about the day's events. "It's fine, I love it. But if you're trying to wrap up a project, you can't really think here."

Only recently has Bear come to understand that embracing creative control also means knowing when to relinquish it. "Honestly, I didn't learn about taking care of myself until, like, three years ago. I didn't do things for my own emotional enjoyment until I was single again," he says, referring to his short-lived break from partner Samantha Beardsley. (The two are now married, they both took the "Bear" surname when they wed.) "You have to live through that. I was getting more and more depressed when I was making [2017's] *Boo Boo*. My brain wouldn't stop moving, and I couldn't get away from the computer. Like, Damn, I gotta design this, I gotta write this up, I gotta tech this thing. I was giving





myself all the work and never being like, Okay, maybe you should just sleep in today.”

Living in Portland at the time of *Boo Boo*’s release, Bear skipped touring the new album — known to be the most lucrative part of a musician’s career — to take up painting and hiking and to travel down to the Bay Area to embed himself in the art scene there. “I never gave myself a support system, and you need that for when you don’t have your person,” he says. “I had to force myself to stop being so introverted and just go make friends, because you’re gonna drive yourself crazy.”

When he moved back to Oakland in 2017, he formally opened Company Records. Ten years after Toro y Moi’s inception, Bear is still DIY, but he’s swapped his dorm room for a label and an incubator. Today, Company includes a print shop, a recording studio, a rehearsal space and a gallery, all of which are accessible to local artists. Providing such resources allows Bear to step out of the spotlight while retaining creative control, but it also means his lonesome endeavors have to take a backseat.

Despite (or maybe because of) his penchant for putting in overtime, personal retreats have emerged as an essential part of his creative process. Last year he decamped to a writer’s cabin outside San Francisco to complete *Outer Peace*. There, amid the solitude, wood paneling and a mounted cow’s skull, he took stock of the work he’d produced while in existential free-fall.

“*Outer Peace* is successful because I got a chance to love every step of the process,” he says. “Before, it was kind of a burden. Now I just got to play creative director.”

Bear’s voice takes on a quiet reverence as he reflects on the building’s surrounding arts community, which inspired Company’s communal approach to making art. “The whole reason I moved back from Portland was because I got grandfathered into this spot when my friend moved away,” he says a little breathlessly. “It’s all just iconic artists. Just amazing shit.”

Behind us sits a row of studios, the windows of which offer glimpses into the practices of printers, metalworkers, sculptors and painters, many of whom, Bear says, have been tenants since the rent-controlled complex popped up in the 1970s. “These guys are like OG. That’s why I feel so honored to have this space. They’re of that era, the beatniks who moved here,” he says. “That movement influenced this area to become a hub of open minds. You feel more at home here.”

The older generations of artists who’ve endured also recharge Bear, even if he’s aware that the playing field has changed. There has never been a more paradoxical time to be an artist: Hyperconnectivity is at war with cultural disconnection. More money is being exchanged by fewer hands. Corporate power precludes bottom-up innovation, forcing fringe industries to exist on their own terms and to rely on one another for community.

“You have to brand yourself. That’s what it comes down to. It sucks, but it’s no different than being the local real estate guy who’s got his picture on every bench,” Bear says. “If you’re going to give yourself away, why not put it into your work?”

For his part, Bear has come a long way from the milieu that launched his career. No matter his and his veteran neighbors’

aspirations, he recognizes they can control only what they produce. And they recognize that honing their skills, if focused enough, can only lead to beautiful results. “We just want to make things that help us connect,” he says. “If that’s the motive, what it’s going to come down to is that face-to-face interaction is still going to hold value in the future.”

Face-to-face connections are valuable because they can’t be co-opted, of course. Ultimately, they’re reminders of the control we have over the world that surrounds us. It’s not much, but maybe that’s just fine.

“I see myself as a local shop owner. I don’t aspire to take over the industry or anything. I just want to do good and serve who I can within my reach,” he says. “And take it one step at a time. It has sort of been my approach this whole time. It’s just building something in town.”

As we lower ourselves back into the studio, Bear

asks me if I’m hungry. “I’m kind of starving,” he says.

We hastily gather our things to get to the restaurants before they close. Bear does a final sweep, locking doors, shutting cabinets, powering down equipment and switching off lights. The complex’s heavy steel doors latch shut behind us with a decisive thud.

“Shit,” Bear says, pivoting. He’s forgotten his keys. His co-workers left hours ago, so we have to wait for a superintendent to let us in. I wander outside the complex’s communal garden, where the branches of a small tree hang heavy with plums.

He plucks one and hands it to me. The flavor is floral and honey sweet, unusual and familiar. We stand there, feasting on plums and laughing at the absurdity. It’s not what we’d planned, but it’s satisfying just the same. ■



“I don’t aspire to take over
the industry or anything.
I just want to serve who I
can within my reach.”







BEING SHOT

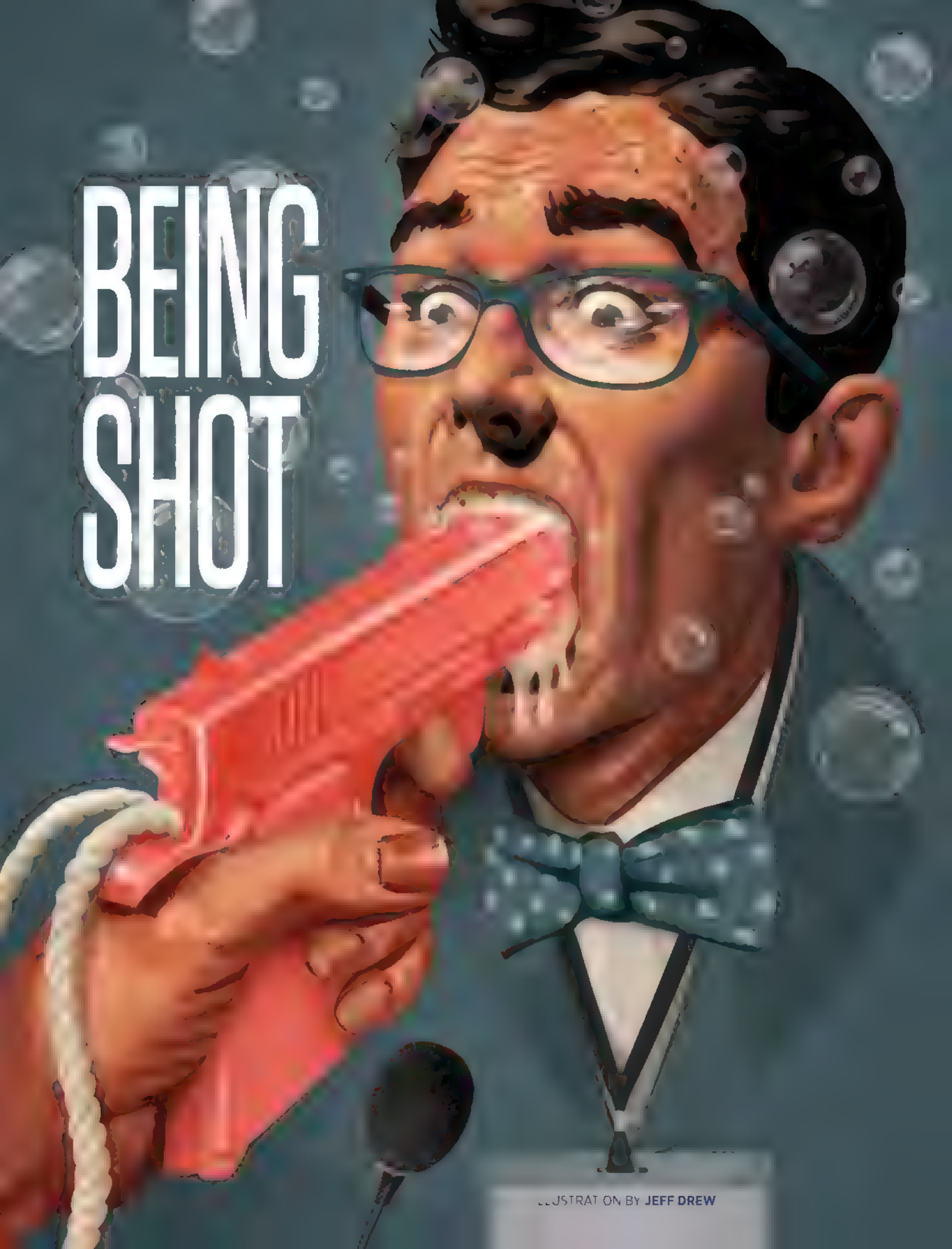


ILLUSTRATION BY JEFF DREW

WAS THE PROFESSOR
DYING OR MERELY
EXPERIENCING A NEW
KIND OF AMERICAN
DISCOURSE?

FICT ON BY
**CATHERINE
LACEY**

When I was shot, I was not surprised. I'd been waiting so long to be shot. Several childhood nights I dreamt of being assassinated by the entire cast of a popular sitcom, or spent afternoons wondering which neighborhood boy could soon shoot me, and I was regularly visited by visions of the mayor or a news anchor or a row of arm-linked Rockettes pursuing me with bullets, and several times I had nightmares that both my mother and my father, each of them, one after the other, shot me in the head. I have never touched a gun. I'm simply not that sort of person — so it has long been my American fate to meet the other end of a trigger. The right to bear arms carries the obligation to bear their burden.

Just before feeling no surprise in being shot, I was, however, briefly perplexed that this long-anticipated event had happened in a particularly dispiriting hotel conference room. The folding chairs and grim lighting simply set the wrong stage — it was somehow too ordinary of a location and yet not quite ordinary enough, not ordinary in the right way. The contrast of the image was set too low. The air felt pixelated. But then, holding my gut wound, I was overcome by how the blood pooling in my hands was as luxuriously temperate as the water of a perfectly calibrated bathroom faucet in a fine-dining establishment, and it was in that moment I fell to my knees, in awe or pain, as the room filled with screams and gun smoke and the smell of burnt flesh.

Hunched over the decorative carpet — a golden floral pattern interspersed with royal green fleurs-de-lis — I struggled to recall the history of the fleurs-de-lis, but all I could remember was the symbol meant one thing in one century, then meant its opposite in the next century, and now it carried both meanings or perhaps any meaning anyone wanted for it, or perhaps it had no meaning at all. True, European history was not exactly my field, but how horrible it was to see how poorly my own brain had held on to history. Hadn't open necks sent blood rolling between Parisian cobblestones? The least I could do — yes, the very least anyone could do — was to remember.

The chintzy chandelier above me was being dismantled by gunfire, and fake plastic crystal rained on my back as I tried to mentally reassemble key dates of the French Revolution. Yet who can be counted upon to recall anything specific when bathing one's hands in such luxuriously temperate fluid, the likes of which you'll find only in

the very best fine-dining establishments? We had assembled in that hotel conference room for the annual Conference on the State of Modern Thought, a four-day invitation-only symposium organized and attended by a cadre of multidisciplinary academics, and each night we dined at the finest restaurants in that year's host city, and at the end of each decadent meal we put down our endowment-backed credit cards with a wanton satisfaction we each tried to wear casually.

More specifically, we had assembled in that hotel conference room for a much-anticipated session led by Harold Mennakin, an extremely charismatic but not entirely substantive philosopher of philosophy who was giving a lecture about how every theoretically monumental philosophical idea descended, paradoxically, from the minuscule subjective reality of one person's meaningless life. The title of the talk was "No Great Man," and I had gathered from the pamphlet's description and from a cursory understanding of Mennakin's work that he was making an ethical argument for a philosophical methodology that is self-negating and pluralistic, which interested me in theory but less, I realized, in actuality. Mennakin was in the midst of a clumsy metaphor about intellectual solipsism that involved a pressure cooker and dried beans when our assailant threw open the double doors, hoisted his guns without grace and began shooting.

To be honest, Mennakin had lost me with the bean metaphor. I hear he's a staunch vegan and perhaps his ethical diet has come at the expense of his sense of aesthetics and though I do agree with him that it's a tragedy we so often fail to see around the corner of ourselves, I was much relieved by the sudden interruption, a relief that lasted at least until I fell to the floor, where my wound issued its seductive warmth into my hands.

Moments later, the shooter paused to deliver some remarks at the vacated podium. The shooter believed us all to be perverts and delinquents who had scammed our way into positions of

THE WORD *PROBLEMATIC* HAD BEEN DEPLOYED AS IF IT WERE A POCKETKNIFE FIT FOR ANY USE.

academic authority, and he accused us of trying to convert the American collegiate masses to our dark and tweedy ways. "All of you should be institutionalized, removed from the mating pool, or worse," he told us, and though I did not agree with him, I had to admit that his delivery was surprisingly compelling. The shooter called us atheists, snobs, intellectuals — to which none of us would levy any objections — "and one of you," he said, "wrote a disgusting story about a dog trying to have sex with a human elbow." And it was appalling and it had to stop and someone had to be the one to stop it. "What the fuck is wrong with you people? Who needs this stuff? Why do you want anyone to think about these things?" Then he resumed fire.

We were all professors, of course, but we were also philosophers and theorists and essayists and economists, of a sort, and though none of us would openly call ourselves artists, a scarce few of us painted or made films and there were a handful who had once or still did publish poetry or fiction in journals that ranged from vaguely available to wholeheartedly obscure. In fact, I had been the one, several months prior to the conference, who had published a poem that included the image of a dog trying to insert his penis into a slit between the speaker's forearm and biceps, a moment that causes the speaker, a man, to empathize with all of womankind. The poem had, to that minor literary journal's surprise, become the focal point of three days' worth of internet debate, and in the many critical takedowns and defenses of the poem, the word *problematic* had been deployed as if it were a pocketknife fit for any use. As a result, I'd been invited to this year's Conference on the State of Modern Thought to give a lecture on the *problematic* nature of the contemporary use of the word *problematic*.

Lisa Kindalee, however, one of the staunchest critics of that poem's very existence (not to mention its publication), had also been invited to this year's conference to give a competing lecture on the revolutionary nature of the use of the word *problematic* over the past decade of public discourse. To make matters worse,

our lectures had been scheduled to happen concurrently, forcing any potential attendee to choose a side before even hearing the arguments in a debate that was not necessarily as diametrically opposed as the session titles made it seem.

I've always been uncomfortable with conflict and competition of any sort, a skittish disposition that was partly what led me into academia in the first place. I've always had an aversion to games and sports, despite possessing a somewhat hefty physique. At a young age I longed to be a history professor, because history made me cry in a way that felt historical, as if I were crying tears that belonged to the dead, as if that sorrow won me an esteemed place in the world, and even as a child I disliked that platitude about history repeating itself, not because it wasn't true — it was and still is, in a way — but because that phrase had been repeated so often that it had become itself, and by becoming itself it had become invisible, a repetition of a copy of a thought, a vacant cheer from the sidelines of a history one is excused from ever knowing because one is actively living through its equally unimportant sequel, as if all years merely slipped from a machine that made years.

But there I was on the floor of a hotel conference room, a Xerox of an American history, bleeding into the fleurs-de-lis. Another plastic jewel fell from the battered chandelier and landed on my shoulder as gently as a tapping finger — excuse me, sir.

The shooter, I'm told, made no rush on his way through the lobby and was tackled, without resisting, by a frenzied security guard, and only then was it revealed that all his guns had been made of 3-D-printed plastic and all the bullets were a sort of rubber semi-explosive filled with an indeterminate molten substance. All our wounds were superficial and every last one of us survived, which means this story can be read without sacrificing a moment of anyone's sincere pleasure in the languid unwinding of late capitalism.

Still — we were all sent to the hospital as a precaution. There was a concern that we may have been exposed to a chemical weapon.

er merely committed to justice, an imperialist vision, or more complex than they first seemed, prone to infection, prone to litigation, had raised myself from the hotel carpet I realized the pleasant warmth I'd felt thirty hands had not been my own beautiful blood but some strange syrupy substance, faintly neon red, perfumed with gasp powder and death. How, I wondered, had this substance been able to maintain such consistently pleasing temperature, that expertly calibrated blood of hot and cold?

Prior to the shooting, everyone had spent their free time before events trying to carry each other's liver for hypothetical liver that might later be needed for given; and a minority among the group took this exercise into the realm of extramarital affairs. Though most of these affairs seem to have been experienced only in the abstract and only a very small number were ever concretized, but for the most part the conference is just a way for a group of people to use their obscure interests as a path toward people who might pay them some attention. That's all it ever really is.

After the shooting, however, the dining conference moved from unofficial to official, to the hospital. A psychologist/philosopher began giving a speech in the waiting room about how the shooting had pulled back a curtain on each of our truest identities, even that way it was a kind of gift. When the shots began, some of us had panicked and fled the room, stopping overbodies and pushing past each other, while others had remained supine in our chairs, our latent suicidal tendencies laid bare. Some had thrown themselves over the bodies of those with whom they'd been engaged in merely trying to begin affairs, preferring to take themselves into widowhood rather than become a person who had seen their lover, whether imagined or actual, die.

I was assigned a hospital room with many other conference attendees. Having students punctured me with an injection needle in several places on both my arms before she finally administered some kind of medication that made me weep and tremble. "Don't worry," she kept saying, as other nurses and academics passed in and out of the room's many doors. "Don't worry." A woman walked the length of the room, from one door to another, with her cell phone ringing some melodic tune several times before the nursing student finally finished her task, my arms a mass of rubbing alcohol and blood and half-stuck bandages.

By then the hospital room had been given someone given, and someone had installed himself atop a chair in the corner of the room and began an impromptu lecture on how no belief is meaningful until it is translated into action. I recognized this as a repurposed version of a talk he was already scheduled to give about how the two primary problems of the internet were that it created the illusion that digital speech was equivalent to action and that it upheld the illusion that any statement can ever be completely sincere or altruistic. His proclamations never went in a room. The updated form of this lecture posited that, at the very least, the shooter's sincere objection to our works and our divisions, despite being unfounded and logically inconsistent, had led him to action; and when the shooter enacted his beliefs by shooting us, he had revealed a dark truth about our beloved Conference on the State of Modern Thought, which is that most of those who participate in it have blindly accepted this lie of the necessity of the Individual in the Information Age.

As I listened to this lecture, I had a small mirror, I learned, in the hospital cell, and it was simply not large enough for me. I have a very large man. I stretched my bruised belly and cried up historical tang, trembling as I was held hostage to whatever drug was flowing in the bloodlines, waiting all the shots within me.

Today, I tell him the president of the University at his name. I Modern Thought itself beside me to say that my lecture had been canceled as it had been considered obsolete by recent events, but when I asked him if Lisa Kindalee's lecture had also been canceled, he just said the story was still unfolding, that new lines of thinking were already being drawn, that I would soon have the opportunity to supply for next year's conference and he would personally ensure that my application was given full consideration by the committee, and with that the president was gone.

Then a young woman I'd never seen before sat beside me and we looked down at me neither gaze somewhere between combat and sexual. "Are you the one who wrote the poem about the dog trying to fuck the creek of someone's elbow?" I nodded. "I wanted to tell you that," she said, and I blushed up. I thought that meant she wanted to discuss my complicated system of mirrored trees and lambs, a poem that no one ever mentioned in the poem's ensuing controversy, but she hadn't meant that at all. She inserted three fingers into the crook of my elbow, right at the spot where the injection had finally taken, and I wanted to tell her that even though the poem contained the image of a dog trying to fuck the creek of someone's elbow, that didn't mean the poem was about a dog trying to fuck the creek of someone's elbow. That was the thing about all, wasn't it? That the apparent subject concealed the true object? I wasn't here of anything anymore, I thought, or maybe that's just what the medication wanted me to think. Was I speaking? Was the poem spinning? How much of the thing I called my life had been imaginary? The girl skipped away from the table's edge, and I recalled, for some unknown reason, how utterly Modern it was that the neighborhood boys of my childhood were so intent on playing a game called War all summer, though none of them, to my knowledge, ever joined in actual war.

Then, moved by a mysterious neurochemical or moved by some tiny spirit of the academic, I stood on my seat and launched into a lecture about surveillance. I'd just had: Poetry. The sweet form, poetry, is never still alive in America! Had the shooter not been stirred by a poetic creation of carefully calibrated treachery and made into action? Had the shooter not been changed by power and mighty poem and translated this personal transformation into a physical gesture, a performance, an elaborate gesture meant to elaborate on his thoughts on that poem? I was true (wasn't it true?) that poetry still held real power! Yes, no matter how battered and ignored poetry had become, in this world it still held the power to change the course of history!

I'd become up dirty over poetry and history and I knew I was back down into a fetal position on the cot, and in my half sleep, I thought I heard someone saying that the shooting had in fact been a work of performance art, and someone else said that the shooter was no less of a monster for being an artist, and someone else argued that that art should have the freedom to do harm, and someone else suggested a New American restaurant with an extensive cocktail list, and someone else argued that just because you call yourself an artist doesn't mean you aren't also a sociopath.

But who are we to diagnose anyone? That's not our field, not really. In our hearts, I think, we just want to be good people who are kind to other good people. We get the shots for the sake of public health. We read the manuals on workplace harassment and racism and sexism and carefully, with caution, serious good and before we leave any workplace, we wash our hands for a full 30 seconds with plenty of soap and attention to the nail beds and wrists, and we relish the way the water feels so thick and warm on the blood of our human, off our being human, it all.



UNSTOPPABLE
FORCE

**Laci Kay Somers
& Jesús Ortiz Paz**

Laci Kay Somers | @laci kay somers
Jesús Ortiz Paz | @jesusortizpazfr



Production **Burgerrockmedia** | @burgerrockmedia
Photographer **Diego Farelo** | @diegofarelo
Grooming **Diego Aguilar** | @makeupbydiego



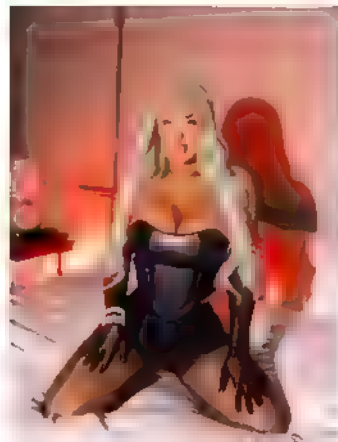


**Jesus Ortiz Paz:**

Jesús Ortiz Paz, the visionary frontman of Fuerza Regida, has redefined the boundaries of Mexican regional music by fusing traditional corridos with contemporary hip-hop and trap influences. Known for his bold style and larger-than-life persona, he has become a powerful force in both the music and fashion worlds, collaborating with major artists like Marshmello while cultivating a refined personal brand. With millions of fans worldwide, Ortiz Paz continues to innovate, bringing a fresh, unapologetic voice to the industry, making him an undeniable icon for the modern era.

**Laci Kay Somers:**

Laci Kay Somers is a multi-talented model, singer, and social media influencer known for her striking beauty and vibrant online presence. With millions of followers across platforms, she has become a sought-after face in fashion and lifestyle editorials, combining sultry looks with an edgy and playful personality. As a featured model for Playboy, Laci embodies confidence and glamour, making her an unforgettable figure in the world of high fashion and entertainment. Her dynamic career also includes ventures into music and acting, solidifying her place as a versatile and influential icon.













my pleasure



IF PLEASURE IS LESS POWERFUL THAN PAIN (SPOILER: IT IS), THEN HOW DO WE MAKE LIFE WORTH LIVING?

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
NICK RASMUSSEN

BY **ADAM CONOVER**

Pleasure sucks.

I can hear you now: "Adam, you're writing in *PLAYBOY*, America's foremost publication dedicated to pleasure. Are you seriously going to argue that pleasure, the very feeling that makes life

worth living, 'sucks'?"

Yes, I am. Sorry, you velvet-clad sybarites. Pleasure isn't all that great, and the idea that it makes life worth living doesn't stand up to the barest scrutiny.

The problem is that pain is a *lot* more powerful than pleasure. The South African antinatalist philosopher David Benatar points out this fundamental asymmetry: "The worst pains are worse than the best pleasures are good. If you deny this, consider whether you would accept an hour of the worst tortures in

exchange for an hour of the most delightful pleasures."

Okay, I'll bite. Would I, in exchange for one hour of supremely satisfying intercourse with a sexually and emotionally fulfilling partner of my choosing, agree to be waterboarded for one hour while a demon slowly peels off my toenails with a pair of red-hot pliers, a stinging jellyfish gives me a titty twister and an Amazonian candiru fish swims up my penis?

Don't know about you. I'll pass.

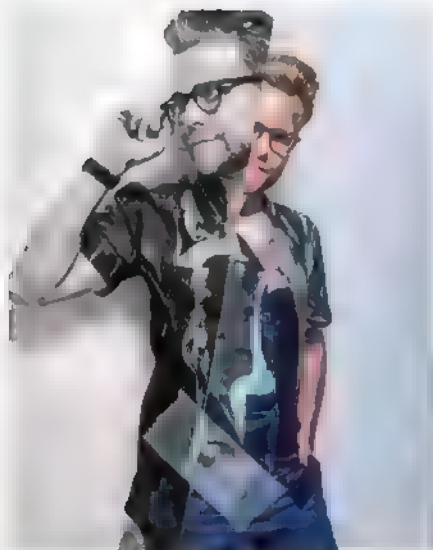
Because pain traumatizes and injures, its effects linger long after it's felt. Pleasure, on the other hand, is fleeting. As soon as it arises, it's gone.

If I may offer a personal example: As I write this, I'm sitting next to a pool at a hotel in Phoenix. The sun is warm, the wind is blowing, and I have a cold beverage in my hand. If anything is pleasurable, it's this! But tomorrow, I have to get up at four A.M., go to the airport and fly coach, with a layover, to Montreal. It doesn't matter how lovely it feels to dip my piggies in the pool today; tomorrow's going to suck. Once again, pain has the upper hand.

Even if we were somehow able to craft lives for ourselves in which we felt pleasure every waking moment—and in America in 2019, this seems to be the goal of an awful lot of people—we would still never be content. "Sure, this is nice," I think, sitting by the pool, the breeze ruffling my hair, "but wouldn't it be even nicer if it were a few degrees cooler, and if I looked better with my shirt off, and if those kids from Ohio weren't hogging the hot tub? I wish I were richer so I could start my own hotel and ban kids forever! *That* would be the life!" And on and on. Pleasure feels nice, but it never truly makes us happy.

Finally, let's not forget that our pleasure often comes at the expense of another's pain. That fat cat up in first class may be enjoying his lie-flat seat, but is it worth it when its existence means those of us in back are all the more cramped and miserable?

The truth is, pleasure is not a goal worth striving for. So what,



instead, should we seek? I would argue that the answer is *satisfaction*. Satisfaction isn't a fleeting sense of joy or titillation; it's a feeling of abiding comfort, of being free from desire. And it can be achieved not just by improving our own lives but by helping those around us. What's more satisfying than knowing you've done good in the world? And while pleasure is often expensive, satisfaction has no price tag and is available to everyone.

Of course, once you're satisfied, if you have the opportunity to experience pleasure every now and again — knock yourself out! Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go engage in emotionally fulfilling intercourse with the partner of my choice. ■

BEFORE I LEARNED THE MYSTERIES OF SELF PLEASURE, I HAD TO ACCEPT THAT I DESERVED TO FEEL GOOD

BY MIEL BREDOUW

"I heard Amanda lies under the bathtub faucet."

I was tucked into my locker after seventh-grade gym, wrangling my sweaty sports bra out from beneath the underwire bra on top of it. I designed this technique so no one could see my nipples. Eavesdropping on my classmates was an unexpected bonus.

"What?"

"Like...spread-eagle."

"Why doesn't she use the hand-shower thing?"

"She doesn't have one."

I might have screamed, "*That's not how you're supposed to take a shower*," if I hadn't been stuck in a two-bra shibari of my own design. Or maybe, "*Is she pregnant with water?*" But I never would have dared ask the only question I actually needed answered. Why?

I wasn't religious. I wasn't even wholesome. I was the one who knew what a blow job was (or, as I learned it, a "blow joe"). I was the one who got in trouble for "swearing like a sailor." I was even the one who proudly told the entire lunch table that I was "pretty sure the applicator thing stays on the outside."

But masturbation? *Whom???*

Slowly, I figured out it was like rubbing that genie lamp inside a cave, except the cave is

hip-huggers and also there's no genie. I felt contaminated for even thinking about it. How could it possibly feel good enough to offset the *humiliating* means of getting there, the *cringe-worthy* noises and *grotesque* expressions I might make, the *devastating* judgment if I was ever found out or how *grody* I'd *definitely* feel afterward? But above all was the insidious thought that had haunted me so long it nearly became me.

Who ever said I deserved to feel good?

Maybe I would have felt differently if I'd had a lock on my bedroom door. If I had liked my body. If I had gone to a school with better sex ed. If I possessed even one crumb of self-esteem. If I had become friends with Amanda, or any girl for that matter. If I could have seen *Big Mouth* or *Pen15* or *Booksmart* or any content that normalizes girls pleasuring themselves, for themselves. But I didn't. And so I learned pleasure as something meant for other people.

Shame followed me into high school like the rolling backpack my chiropractor begged me to use. I didn't know it as "shame" then, just as "the truth." I did start dabbling in sexual activity with other people, but I justified it to myself on the grounds that *they* wanted it. I prided myself on being "chill" and "low maintenance" and "so down-to-earth, I'm basically in hell." But me... horny? *Ha ha ha honestly that's really funny because it's medically impossible for me to be horny my doctor told me and you can ask them except like patient confidentiality and actually who told you I was horny because THAT ONE TIME at the assembly when I yelled "Schwing!" I was doing a very funny bit*

I was so committed to being unburdened by libido that I maintained it for years, without question. I became *The Adult Girl Who Had Never Masturbated* (R.I.P. Stieg Larsson). I even started joking about it — something about my small hands, as if a lack of meaty thumbs and an octave reach exempted me from the bean-flicking draft.

I wish I could say that, one day, some sexy spirit moved me to put on "I'm Every Woman" and finger-blast myself into sensual oblivion. The reality is slightly less empowering: A supportive boyfriend surprised me with a vibrator. Not for him, not for us, just for me. I guffawed, "In what world? I hope they take returns! Why is it so smooth?" But then, in a quiet moment when no one was home, I locked the door, turned off the lights, lit a candle and gave it a try. And all at once, I understood why Amanda had lain spread-eagle beneath the bathtub faucet.

She figured it out at 12. I was twenty-fucking-four. ■





HIGH

DINNER

FINE DINING
RESTAURANT
LIGHT UP LOS ANGELES
WILL THE ACTRESS
CHEF ANDREA DRUMMER
INFUSES INTO EACH
TRANSFORM THE

“ADVOCACY AND CANNABIS— THEY GO HAND IN HAND.”

Chef Andrea Drummer puts the final touches on a fried chicken sandwich while her sous-chef flits around the kitchen, popping ingredients into the fryer. “This brine is nice,” Drummer says, taking a bite of a pickle. “But see this?” She pokes at the bread collapsing under the weight of coleslaw and the hunk of meat. “This should never happen.” She turns to me and sighs. “This sandwich needs more work.”

It’s a scene like countless others in the tense, giddy lead-up to a restaurant’s opening night—but the establishment in this case is Lowell Farms. A Cannabis Café, the first legal cannabis restaurant in the United States. “It’s intimidating,” the 47-year-old chef confesses.

In the stuffy kitchen of the under-construction site in West Hollywood, California, Drummer has been experimenting all week in preparation for the fall opening. Despite the pressure, she appears calm and focused as she stands by the stove in a dark denim apron, a red bandanna holding her hair and beaded bracelets decorating her wrists.

“There are a lot of eyes on me,” Drummer says softly over the din of carpenters and kitchen fans. “I want to do right by everyone.”

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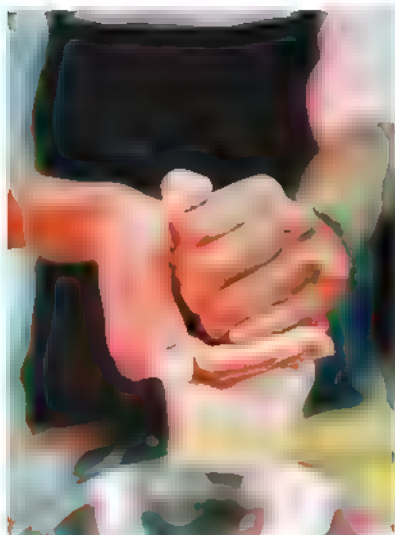
The restaurant, co-owned by cannabis cultivators Lowell Herb Co., marks a shift in an industry hoping to appeal to a market that includes college kids as well as their parents and grandparents—and an industry with a long history of racial tensions and high incarceration rates. Eleven states have legalized recreational marijuana use since 2012, and though the industry raked in a total of \$10.4 billion in 2018 and is projected to be worth \$32 billion globally by 2022, there’s still plenty of room for social integration. And that’s just what this fine-dining experience offers.

Residents of those 11 states may be open to cannabis consumption but turned off by the common perception of legal bud culture: going to a dispensary where young stoners present you with overpriced pre-rolls, returning home to sit in front of your television and giggle for no reason. But “we all eat,” Drummer notes. “I think it’s important to engage with cannabis the same way a person does when they go out for martinis.” The Lowell café will not serve alcohol, so the restaurant will be a pioneering experiment in which cannabis is the main social lubricant—testing Drummer’s theory that sharing a meal and getting high are both communal experiences that have the power to help people connect. When the eatery opens this fall, cannabis sommeliers will tend to each dining party to suggest food and strain pairings based on individual preferences. Diners will then have the option of enjoying joints or vaporizers before and during their meal. “We’re trying to focus on the idea that it’s going to be approachable for many different people, so the entire place will have overgrown living walls—very

aromatic, very lush,” says restaurant director Kevin Brady, who goes on to praise Drummer’s attention to detail and longtime contributions to the Lowell brand. “Andrea has been partnered with Lowell from the beginning, when we petitioned the city for a license [in 2016],” he says.

Drummer carefully considers how each strain pairs with a given dish. “I think of the cannabis as I would rosemary or mint—the flavor profile, the notes, if the strain is more pungent or more mild,” she says. “It’s very farm-to-table in every respect, with our food and with the bud.” She goes on to explain how she’ll create dishes to complement both the flavors and the psychoactive effects of whatever strain is “in season.” Blue Dream, for example, pairs well with sweet and savory dishes alike due to its mild flavor and notes of blueberry. Drummer adds that the strain elicits an uplifting high that you might associate with dessert, so she’s thinking about pairing it with cereal-milk ice cream sandwiches. She’s also creating dishes with stronger flavors: “When you consume cannabis, your senses are heightened, so the food’s flavor profile is very forward. It’s not a muted palate.”

Drummer views the Lowell café as her opportunity to elevate cannabis-food pairing into a culinary art—and to eventually bring cannabis-infused concoctions to the menu. The café had initially planned to serve Drummer’s gourmet edibles, but current laws forced the company to pivot. “The state legislature is still formulating its policy around cannabis infusions. It’s unclear, and we’d rather take the conservative approach,” Brady says, noting that prepackaged edibles will be available for purchase. “We’re still working to figure out what those next steps look like.”



While the market for legal edibles — think gummies and brownies — has more than doubled since 2011, the products are extremely difficult to regulate. Dosages are unpredictable, and potential toxins have reportedly come up as a result of extraction technology. Meanwhile, the underground cannabis dinner events that continue to appear throughout the country come with problems of their own: A seat at the table can cost more than \$100, and the addition of cannabis can feel like a profit-grubbing afterthought. Still, Drummer notes, compared with the combination of alcohol and food, “cannabis is kinder” if it’s done right. When she cooks with cannabis, she often finds herself listening from the kitchen for a shift in tone once the effects hit her diners. “I hear the cadence go up in such a beautiful way,” she says. “It’s like a symphony.”

But even Drummer had to be convinced of the powers of the bud. “I grew up in the South, where there are certain things you don’t talk about, and that influenced the direction of my career initially,” she says. Raised in a strict Baptist family in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, she was fascinated with food from an early age but thought everyone who indulged in cannabis was lazy. Ironically, she worked as a “very anti-cannabis” drug counselor from 1997 until 2005. It wasn’t until she moved to California in late 2007 that her mind changed: Drummer found herself working for a weed-friendly attorney who proved that people who partake can be successful. When she later suffered from sciatica, the near-instant back relief cannabis offered meant she could pursue her passion as a professional chef. In 2009 she enrolled at Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Pasadena, and by 2012 she’d founded her cannabis dinner service, Elevation VIP Cooperative. “It liberated me,” she says of her career pivot.

The Lowell Herb Co. team met Drummer at an event in 2016. The brand was impressed by Drummer’s experience under celebrity chefs such as Thomas Keller of the French Laundry. Her work as an outspoken cannabis advocate sealed the deal. “Advocacy and cannabis — they go hand in hand,” Drummer says. During our conversation over the hot (and getting hotter) stove, she points to the company’s social-equity programs, such as last year’s billboards in downtown Los Angeles that advertised jobs for nonviolent cannabis offenders.

“What was important to me was the team they assembled and how diverse it was,” said Drummer at a UCLA “Being Black in Cannabis” panel in February, citing the company’s hiring practices. “They didn’t just offer me a job,” she added. “They offered me a partnership.”

• • •

Drummer’s visibility as a black female chef matters. Since starting Elevation VIP she has worked her way to the top, including landing an appearance as a competitor on Netflix’s cannabis cooking show *Cooking on High* in 2018. Her name has appeared on lists of America’s top cannabis chefs, which is how her sous-chef, Rochelle Tyler, discovered her. “I was like, ‘Oh, that’s so cool, a black woman on the list,’” says Tyler, also a woman of color, who started working for Drummer after an introduction from a mutual friend. “She’s always speaking up for people like us.”

More than 80 percent of legal cannabis companies are under white ownership, while only about four percent are owned by black people. At the same time, cannabis arrests are rising in the U.S. On average, blacks are almost four times more likely to be arrested for cannabis than their white counterparts, despite roughly equal use. There is, however, a chance for cannabis legalization to be informed by social justice, if the people in power keep these disparities in mind. The House Judiciary Subcommittee





"IT'S A LOT OF PRESSURE, BUT WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?"

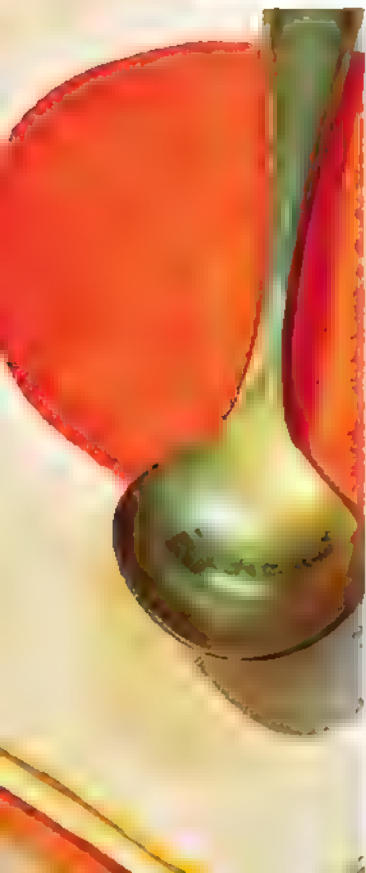
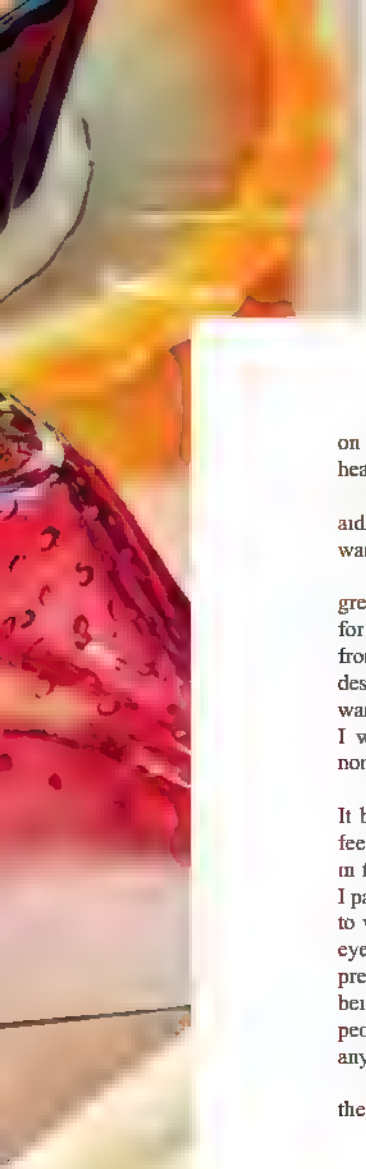
on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security held its first hearing in July 2019 to discuss social equity in the industry an early step toward mending prohibition's damage and aiding communities disproportionately harmed by the drug war.

"If you're in this industry and blind to the fact that a great number of black and brown people are incarcerated for doing the very thing we have the freedom to earn a living from, I would say shame on you," Drummer says. The chef describes her vision of diversity-minded hiring practices: "I want to change the landscape of who we see in the industry. I would love for anyone who has been exonerated of a nonviolent cannabis crime to come and work in the kitchen."

...

It has been two hours since I arrived, and I'm starting to feel a little claustrophobic. But Drummer is still engrossed in food prep, now tinkering with the ice cream sandwiches. I pack up my things and make my way to the door, stopping to wish her luck. She grasps my hand and looks me in the eye. "I'm so scared," she says in a low voice. "It's a lot of pressure, but what's the alternative? Sitting around and not being able to change the narrative? Not being able to hire people to be a part of this industry? Not having learned anything?"

She shakes her head. "So I'll take it," she says. "I'll do the work so someone else doesn't have to."





ALPHACHANNELING

PLAYBOY ADVISOR

Dr. Chris Donaghue — certified sex therapist, director of clinical education for the Sexual Health Alliance and host of Loveline — takes on the role of Playboy Advisor and weighs in on readers' questions about oral sex, orgasm-less sex, amateur sex, sweaty sex, forbidden sex, interracial sex and more

Q: *love cunnilingus I can go down on a woman for hours My favorite sex position is using my tongue to make a woman come while getting myself off And the woman almost always comes! This means I rarely have penetrative sex, as I am just fine coming without it. A woman I recently started dating tells me it's strange that masturbation gets me off better than her vagina. Should I be worried that I, a straight man, am not that into vaginal sex?* B K

A: The first thing to note is that her vagina is still getting you off. Rest assured that there's nothing "strange" about preferring masturbation over penetration, because there is no "correct" way to have sex. The goal of sex isn't penetration; it's achieving mutual pleasure. You deserve to feel confident and authentic in whatever helps you do that.

Further, your heterosexuality should not inform anything about your sex life other than the gender of your sexual partner (though even that is fluid nowadays). Being straight does not predetermine one's favored sex positions, nor should it restrict them. Your heterosexuality also isn't an excuse for anyone to shame you.

Yes, calling someone's sexual preferences "strange" amounts to a form of shaming, which can quickly turn abusive. Your concern should be about other nontraditional interests your girlfriend might pass judgment on. When we reveal our sexual interests to a lover, the response should be one of acceptance — as long as those interests are mindful of your partner's pleasure and cause no harm to others.

Which is why I must ask: Is your partner dissatisfied with receiving only oral sex? Has she asked you to do more than go down on her? Have you refused? If so, it's your duty to incorporate more penetration so both your desires are being fulfilled. This doesn't mean giving up what you like. Introducing a vibrator, for example, leaves one hand free for masturbation while still giving your tongue access to her clitoris.

If she has expressed that oral sex alone satisfies her, you need to tell her how her words make you feel (i.e., inadequate). Our self-worth is an accumulation of how others treat us, but you are responsible for your self-esteem. Human interactions, especially sex, are never neutral. You will always leave a sexual encounter either feeling better about yourself, your body and sex in general or feeling bad about it all. Choose the former.

Q: *Why has adultery become so prevalent? I've witnessed three of my friends cheating separately, though all three did it publicly and in front of me. I'm close with their partners, so their infidelities have complicated our friendships. This has made me quite cynical about dating and relationships. Overall, I don't know how to handle what I've seen. Do I call them out, tell their partners or shut my mouth and toss out my moral compass?* M F

A: Simple answer: Adultery is prevalent because monogamy is hard. According to data collected by the General Social Survey from 2010 to 2016, as many as one in five men have cheated on their spouses. Comparatively, 13 percent of women have cheated on their

spouses. Those figures increase as people get older, however, suggesting that monogamy becomes more difficult with age. Meanwhile, the definition of cheating continues to evolve. According to the 2019 Playboy Sex Survey, 17 percent of female respondents did not consider sexual intercourse "a form of cheating."

The core issue driving people to cheat is not just the tension between desiring commitment and wanting the freedom to explore but also the toxic rules that govern many monogamous relationships. Toxic monogamy is the idea that you have a right to own or control your partner. This includes viewing others of the same gender as threats and not respecting your partner's privacy (How many readers have broken into their lovers' cell phones?) Such behavior sucks the joy and sustainability out of any relationship.

Cheating is an unacceptable solution for whatever issues your friends may be trying to solve (or run from). It robs a relationship of trust, which is difficult to get back. Most of us could benefit from being honest with our partners about our needs, and that includes a desire to have sex with others while in an exclusive relationship. Deciding to do so without telling a partner is nothing short of destructive.

But let's switch back to you, the innocent bystander. I suggest speaking to each of your cheating friends individually so you can better understand their relationships. Not everyone has the same rules, and it's increasingly common for couples to enter monogamy with different expectations and dynamics. Some couples are fully open, some allow for

Orgasms are hot and fun, but they aren't guaranteed, nor should they be required. The goal isn't mutual orgasm but mutual pleasure. By expanding our definition of what we call "sex," we can create new sexual connections and new kinks.

casual make-outs and drunk flirting, and the majority are traditional and closed. Might all three of your friends be in open relationships? It's unlikely — only one in 10 people ages 25 to 34 are — but, perhaps.

While it is not your job to fix anyone's relationship (or destroy it), you should confront your friends about how they've put you in an unfair position. In the end, being a moral friend doesn't make you the moral police. If they turn on you or respond with anger, you have no reason to stay faithful to them — something they should know a thing or two about

Q: *My husband and I have been married for 14 years. We enjoy a physically intense sex life that includes verbal degradation and sex that leaves us both bruised. We've never taken it to the point where either of us feels unsafe, only once have my bruises been large enough that I've had to cover them. I recently started bingeing HBO's Big Little Lies, and on the show, Nicole Kidman and Alexander Skarsgård's characters engage in similar sexual behavior — though the balance of power in their sex life seems less equitable. The Kidman character's therapist says she may be addicted to the pain. I never thought such a thing was possible. Is it? Could my husband and I be addicted to pain during sex?* D.B.

A: You shouldn't retroactively pathologize 14 years of a healthy sex life because of a fictitious plotline on a soapy TV show. For one, you cannot be "addicted" to pain. You can seek pain, enjoy it and prefer sex with it, but you cannot be addicted to it.

Our culture likes to dramatize extreme interests by deeming them "addictions." Diverse and subversive sexual acts create anxiety among sex-phobic social puritans.

Understand that the purpose of a phrase like *sex addiction*, which the American Psychiatric Association rejects, is to diagnose someone's sex life as abnormal. There's nothing psychologically wrong with intensely — or even painfully — experiencing your sexuality, as long as it's safe, consensual and with someone you trust. I work with many patients who strive to heighten their arousal, expand their sex lives and find true compatibility. You and your husband seem to have achieved all that — to which I say congratulations.

Q: *I'm a white man who has dated only chunky, women of color. No one has ever commented on the similarities between my exes, but today's climate has made me hyper-aware of body shaming, misogyny and racism. Is it possible I have some underlying, unhealthy attraction to women of a particular race and body type that I'm not fully aware of?* A.P.

A: If I were to read your question a different way, it may sound as though you're covertly asking whether you, a white man, should sleep only with thin white women. The answer to that is an obvious no.

It's refreshing how aware you are that your sexuality can impact others in ways you may not fully realize. To me, this speaks to your compassion. Having compassion for people who come from different backgrounds is a goal of intersectionality. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and defined as "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism and classism) combine, overlap or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups," intersectionality aims to increase awareness of the power imbalances in all areas of life. That includes our sex lives.

Fetishization is the process of reducing a person to certain physical attributes and ignoring everything else about them. Thus, fetishizing larger women or women of color is indeed a problem. But I don't believe you exhibit this fetish, as your relationships with these women have all gone beyond sex. They're not sex objects; they're your partners.

It's important to be conscious of how you use your privilege and social power, but there's no politically correct form of sexual desire. Don't overthink what turns you on, and don't resist what arouses you because of identity politics. In the U.S., healthy interracial relationships have long represented two people pushing back against societal inequality. As long as you treat the women in your life like the gorgeous, intelligent, autonomous sexual beings they are, you have nothing to be concerned about.

Q: *My sister's boyfriend recently relocated from Chicago, where they were living together, to Boston, where I live, for work. As a straight woman, I find him immensely attractive and have had many sex dreams about him throughout their relationship. Now that we live in the same city, he constantly texts me to hang out. I don't trust myself around him and have gone to great lengths to avoid contact. My sister wants to know why I won't help her boyfriend settle in. It's actually causing me a lot of stress. What do I do?* K.H.

A: Why do you think you wouldn't be able to control your impulses if the two of you were to spend time together? I suspect you're harboring some hope of a future in which you two end up together. Sorry, but he isn't interested in having sex with you. He just wants to spend time with someone he knows in an unfamiliar city.



Your anxiety is par for the course in cases of unrequited love, but don't lose yourself in a world of what-ifs. Boston is home to many single men you could date. Don't waste your time obsessing over your sister's boyfriend, who is unavailable, as if he's your only option. He isn't.

In the meantime, make this man a person your sister loves deeply feel at home without becoming a home-wrecker. There are many easy ways to make this work. Socialize in public or do group activities. Don't spend time alone with each other, and don't get intoxicated together. Avoiding him isn't sustainable; should they wed, you'll be running from him till death do they part.

Q: *I'm a virgin, but I want to start having sex soon. How am I supposed to know which condom is right for me? I'm average length but thick in girth. I'm also uncircumcised. I don't want a condom to ruin the mood when it finally happens.* J.G.

A: Condom selection, like everything else tied to sex, is trial and error. Determining your condom size is not only important for your (and his/her) pleasure but integral to effective birth control, STI prevention and a healthy sex life. Sizing charts can be found online, but beware. The charts aren't standard across manufacturers. Condoms are also made from

different materials, such as latex, polyisoprene and polyurethane. Some feature studs, ribbing and prelubricant. Some are colored, others are flavored. All of this is to say finding the right condom goes beyond fit.

Start by investing in a few brands and various styles. Many brands come in packs of one to three and can be purchased online. Try one on and wear it while masturbating to kick-start your body into linking protection with arousal. Your first time will be awkward for a lot of unforeseeable reasons, but I can assure you that the person you take to bed will be unimpressed you came prepared. Oh, and asking your bedfellow to put the condom on you turns a potentially awkward moment into foreplay.

Q: *I play in a rugby league, which requires me to wear a cup. My girlfriend loves it. When I come home from a match, she tears off my uniform and asks me to fuck her while wearing my sweaty jockstrap. But pulling the cloth pouch to the side is distracting, and I can't stay hard. This has left us both frustrated by our spontaneous postgame sex sessions because neither of us finishes. What's behind my girlfriend's fetish for my dirty jockstrap, and how can I fulfill her fantasy even when my body isn't responding?* R.T.

A: First off, congrats on having an assertive, sexually empowered girlfriend. A confident

partner who *demand*s sex? You're luckier than you may realize. Second, your question is a perfect example of how sex helps us grow and mature, because what you view as problems—an inability to stay hard, an inability to climax—are opportunities to remind you what makes sex so great.

To start, nothing is wrong with your body. Orgasms are hot and fun, but they aren't guaranteed, nor should they be required for sex between two people to feel complete. Sex is supposed to be fun, and you don't need to finish to have fun. Fulfill her fantasy by fucking her while wearing the jockstrap. If you go soft, start using your tongue or your fingers, or bring in a toy. Put the jockstrap on her face, switch up positions, ask her to ride you or have her go down on you to bring back your erection.

The goal here isn't mutual orgasm but mutual pleasure. By expanding our definition of what we call "sex," we can create new sexual connections and new kinks.

By the way, the science behind fetishes is a theoretical guessing game, as fetishes represent a complex intersection of brain activity, cultural conditioning and personal experience. Don't sweat about what's behind a fetish (as long as it's not the identity-based variety I mentioned earlier). Just enjoy what comes next—even if you don't. ■





Victoria Duval

Sophisticated. Sultry. Sexy.

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Congratulations on your Playboy New Zealand Playmate Cover! What does this mean to you? Being on the cover of Playboy New Zealand is such a great honor, something I've been dreaming about for a long time! It makes me feel extremely proud and grateful

What do you think of when it comes to Playboy and the iconic bunny? Ever since I was a teenager I've been a big fan of Playboy. I was lucky enough to attend the famous Playboy mansion parties back in LA and meet some of the bunnies in person. For me, the bunny is a symbol that embodies a lifestyle that celebrates confidence, allure, beauty, and a touch of mischief

Have you ever been to New Zealand? If not, would you like to visit someday? New Zealand is currently on top of my list of places to visit, I hear a lot great things about it especially from seasoned travelers naming it the best country in the world to explore

Tell us about your background... Where are you from? Where do you live now? Born and raised in Eastern Europe, I now reside in beautiful Florida majority of the year when I'm not jetting around the world.

Besides English, do you speak any other languages? English is my preferred language, I also speak Russian, some Ukrainian and currently learning Spanish.

Favorite cocktail drink? Espresso martini

Do you prefer the beach or the pool? It depends on the beach, you can find me mostly poolside nowadays

Read the book or watch the movie? Much of a movie buff, I enjoy comedy, documentary

and occasionally a good thriller

What attracts you the most in a partner? I appreciate someone who's intelligent with a good sense of humor, and a partner I can look up to and learn from. Also he should be adventurous, open minded, and a fun loving man

Are you a sexual person? How important is sex in a relationship? Yes, very much so. Sex and intimacy are both very important parts of the relationship for me

Favorite position? CEO



Describe your perfect date: A nice romantic dinner, I enjoy discovering a new restaurant in town together. Or something completely out of the ordinary, like skydiving

As a model, who or what inspires you the most? Von Tease. I love her aesthetic and she puts on an amazing show

Where do you see yourself 10 years from now? Ten years from now I will be doing what I love, traveling the world while living somewhere beautiful close to nature







20 / Q

THOMAS MIDDLEDITCH

PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIAN BUCHAN

AHEAD OF *SILICON VALLEY*'S FINAL SEASON, THE EMMYNOMINATED STAR OPENS UP ABOUT THE UNEXPECTED FROM HIS DREAM ROLES TO SEXUAL EXPLORATION TO SHOOTING GUNS WITH ALEX JONES

BY
RYAN
GAJEWSKI

Q1: *The real Silicon Valley has changed drastically since Silicon Valley debuted on HBO in 2014. Would it be a different show if it were starting now?*

MIDDLEDITCH: I really don't know, but I do wonder if this show has had anything to do with the consciousness of that. Season six will deal with privacy issues. Richard is pushing a new, decentralized internet where no one tracks or sells user data.

Q2: *The show has been nominated for a best comedy Emmy for the five preceding seasons but has never won. You've been nominated for best actor once. As you head into the final season, does it seem like Silicon Valley has always been HBO's bridesmaid?*

MIDDLEDITCH: I always figured the most I would get would be a nomination. Even if you've told yourself that this is all stupid, when you lose you're like, "I shouldn't be hummed, but I am quite sad about it." I'm sure HBO would rather have the show go on for a few more seasons, but our showrunners are like, "No, this is the story."

Q3: *With Silicon Valley, Veep and Game of Thrones each having their swan songs this year, is anyone at HBO thinking, 'Shit, we're losing all our great shows'?*

MIDDLEDITCH: The TV landscape in general is figuring out how to compete in the new world of television. Players like Netflix have forced everyone to reinvent themselves. I don't think anyone is panicked.

I mean, they're cleaning house with *Game of Thrones*, but HBO is a prestige network. In the end, a network has to have just one good thing that people watch in order to get awards.

Q4: *Having left Facebook and Twitter, you're presumably not a fan of Mark Zuckerberg or Jack Dorsey. Do you agree with Elizabeth Warren and other presidential hopefuls who want to break up Facebook, Amazon and other tech giants?*

MIDDLEDITCH: It's a great idea. And no, I'm not a huge fan of Zuckerberg and Dorsey, but I don't like to slight them either. Without selling user data, it's not a viable business. And I still have Instagram. Also, I was never really good at Twitter, to be honest.

Q5: *Do you have a fear of the unknown, post Silicon Valley?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Of course I do. When something is successful, you're like, Okay, how do we figure out how to keep it going a little longer? There are 4 million shows, we're definitely not the biggest, but people watch us, which is nice. It's a challenge when you're involved in something to make the decision to end

it. It's hard to shoot Old Yeller—not that we're Old Yeller, because that would imply we're a sick dog. It's more like crawling into your best friend's window and murdering them. It's hard to do that when you don't know what comes afterward. Even if everyone who's involved in the show is guaranteed work, will it be the same type of work?

Q6: *Has your role in this year's Godzilla: King of the Monsters changed your standing in Hollywood?*

MIDDLEDITCH: I think so. Unless you're ordained as an attractive teen, it's hard to get crazy fame right out of the gate. I would love to do big movies all the time or work with great filmmakers; I would love to star on Amazon's *Lord of the Rings* series and transform as the Riddler in a new Batman. I don't think about it analytically, though, because it makes you feel as though you've taken a bath in oil. I just try to do good work so that when I have early-onset Alzheimer's and I'm looking at my IMDb page and my wife tells me, "That's you," I can register that I did some cool shit.

Q7: *You and one of the Godzilla writers visited a swingers club with your partners during production. Are you and Mollie, your wife of four years, familiar with the swinging scene?*

MIDDLEDITCH: I don't know how much I can say, because I don't want my wife to be mad at me. Only after I got married was I like, "Mollie, I'm sorry, but we have to get nontraditional here." To her credit, instead of saying "Fuck you, I'm out," she was like, "Let's figure this out." To be honest, swinging has saved our marriage. We have different speeds, and we argue over it constantly, but it's better than feeling unheard and alone and that you have to scurry in the shadows. By the way, it's now called being "part of the lifestyle." The term *swinging* is old.

Q8: *Is being "part of the lifestyle" something you've always been interested in?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Absolutely not. I self-deprecatingly call myself a pervert, but that's not what it is. I just like it. I'm sexual. I'd always thought I was a romantic and that when I fall in love, that stuff fades away. It does for some years—enough to be like, "I should get married, and I'll be different." But it's part of me. If that's part of your being and it feels important to you, find a way to explore it, because repression sucks.

Q9: *Do you have any advice for couples who may be exploring that lifestyle?*

MIDDLEDITCH: For anything sexual—whether in terms of the sex act or identity or kink—you want to

know where the walls of the box are. Mollie and I have created our own rules, and compared to most of the people we've met who do this kind of shit, our rules are strict. We're not off on our own, we're together, a unit. It's a perpetual state of management and communication, to the point where it's like, "All right, we've got to stop. Chill." I'm gas, and she's brakes. This is actually the premise for a comedy series we're writing together.

Q10: *How do you identify?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Pretty vanilla, probably cis-hetero. Even if I've witnessed situations that may not be for me, I want to witness them anyway. I'm of the mentality "We're only here once." I don't believe in reincarnation or an afterlife, any of that shit. If I look around, I actually see a lot of shit that makes me sad about the world. This is a positive way of connecting with people and experiencing things on a very selfish level.

I've also been to some weird parties that were very *Eyes Wide Shut*, from which I walked away thinking, I don't need it, but I'm glad I saw that. I've seen some dicks, I've seen some butts, I've seen some tits. It's weird. I've totally gotten to the point where I can see a dick and just be like, "Nice hog, buddy." [laughs] And it's not weird. "Man, I'm jealous. Good stuff." I'd like to have gone to the Playboy Mansion, just to have the knowledge. Myself and a lot of other people who start on this journey don't know where they're at in it. They're going, "I think I just need a thing to happen. All I know is, this particular situation is hard." I love my wife like I've never loved anyone before. With two people who feel that way about each other, how do you go down that road? It's tough. Bring a therapist along for the ride.

Q11: *Are you concerned that speaking about this publicly could inadvertently make you a face of the lifestyle?*

MIDDLEDITCH: I would be honored to be the face of something. I don't give a fuck, but my wife is more private, so I have to juggle that. I don't think I would ever be the face of a full-tilt, yourbody-is-my-body lifestyle. The perception is that you open up that door and it's *Eyes Wide Shut*, which isn't necessarily the case. You can go to that party, of course. You pay the fee, you'll go. [laughs] My mantra is, How can I explore this with a 1960s, peace-and-love, full-understanding, everyone's-connected-andfeels-good kind of way? Not every corner is explored, but you have to be patient. I battle my own needs. Sometimes I'm a ravenous little monster, and how do I calm that down?

Q12: *Are you comfortable with your body?*

MIDDLEDITCH: I am, but I'm 37 now, and there are moments lately when I've been having body-image issues. Not many people talk about it being okay for a guy to want to feel sexy. Typically it's "Get fucking swole!" No, I want to look in the mirror and know that I have some semblance of a jaw line and feel confident. No one really talks about the fact that guys don't always feel that. It's okay for boys to want to feel pretty.

Q13: *You've said that you first had the experience of fans wanting to sleep with you as a Second City improv performer on cruise ships. Has that sort of attention increased?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Personally, that's one of the trickier elements of it all, because Mollie doesn't get that and yet she has to witness it. I'm like, "Come on, what about this chick who's obviously really into me?" And Mollie will say, "Yeah, she's into you. Where do I fit in?" That question comes up. There's a lot of negotiation, and adding

fame sometimes makes it easier and sometimes complicates things.

That's the forever-changing landscape in our relationship, because it's about everybody feeling safe. The internet is a possibility for meeting people, but Instagram fucks up marriages. If your partner brings this very forward person from Instagram to you, you'll be like, "Do you guys have a thing?" Whereas if your partner bumps into someone and they start a conversation, it all happens in front of you. It's a game of inches on a minefield to try to predict who's going to feel safe. My first concern is Mollie. Anything that happens has to be run by the queen.

Q14: *You're a fan of *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. Explain that show's greatness to people who hate on it or who've never seen it.*

MIDDLEDITCH: The fun of it is thinking, What would I do? I always think about how utterly difficult it would be for me to survive in that house with all those alphas. Not that I'm not an alpha. I don't perceive myself as a beta or a submissive little bitch—or whatever the fuck betas are supposed to be. But who am I going to joke around with? Even though I know I'm funny and cool, would that person even look at me when compared to all the boneheads? My wife's like, "I think you'd fucking get voted off first," and I'm like, "Me too." [laughs]

Q15: *A 2018 Hollywood Reporter cover story featured the cast of *Silicon Valley* with the headline TRIUMPH OF THE BETA MALE, which led to a rant by Alex Jones about modern masculinity. How does it feel to piss off Jones?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Hilarious. I shot guns with him and my friend at this ranch in Texas maybe six years ago. This was before Infowars got big, and I didn't really know who he was. If I hadn't later learned that he constantly spews awful nonsense, I would have been like, "That guy was super nice." It made me think, Does he really believe all that shit? Because if he's really saying all that just to sell protein powder, he's a diabolical motherfucker. I'm so glad YouTube removed him. There should be more accountability. I don't want to censor everybody, but I want to fucking censor some.

Q16: *You were bullied growing up and have dealt with depression over the years. Is there still pain in that?*

MIDDLEDITCH: It's all part of the path. There were things that were painful, for sure, but I'd rather have that happen versus me being the aggressor. I was catching up with a hometown friend, and she said, "You were really mean to me when I was a kid." I was like, "I didn't even know. I'm so sorry. If only you knew I had a crush on you the whole time."

Q17: *How have success and fame changed the way you cope with those emotions?*

MIDDLEDITCH: Success has changed everything. Fame is something that guarantees change, even if I don't have Pirates of the Caribbean fame like Orlando Bloom. But there's no way to go through fame without it changing you. It's more about how you respond to it and how elastic you are—if you're able to go back to who you really are. Fame becomes dangerous only when you start believing the hype and believing you're a special person above the normal tier of people. And that's hard to avoid because of all the times you get to go to the front of the line. It's difficult not to think, Oh, I am totally special.

Q18: *How does fame affect friendships? You and your former costar T.J. Miller were once close, right?*



MIDDLEMITCH: Everyone reacts differently to him. It's a shame. T.J. is very funny. Whatever he's doing or whatever he wants to do, I wish him success. I'm not going to get into whatever happened. We just stopped seeing eye-to-eye. I'm not the only one he doesn't look eye-to-eye with.

Q20: You're in *Zombieland: Double Tap*, out in October. Do you have the skills to survive a zombie apocalypse?

MIDDLEMITCH: I'm an business-minded private pilot. I'd been wanting to fly since I was 14 or 15 years old, when I got into military history and aviation and PC flight simulators. So if you have a bunker in Montana, save me a bed. I'll get you there.

Q20: Do you think the public knows the real you?

MIDDLEMITCH: Look, I play a lot of video games, but there are other parts of me. There's going to be hockey games and flying airplanes. There's a bit of a hippie in me, because I was raised in Nelson, British Columbia, a hippie town. As much as I enjoy spending an entire weekend playing computer games, I also like to take mushrooms and drink rainwater off a tree. It's all important. ■

**THERE'S NO
WAY TO GO
THROUGH
FAME
WITHOUT IT
CHANGING
YOU.**



THE ULTIMATE MALE FANTASY

FORTY YEARS AGO, SIX ICONS OF QUEER AMERICA TOOK CENTER STAGE AT THE WORLD'S HETERO MECCA

BY GERRICK D. KENNEDY

Inside the packed Great Hall of the Playboy Mansion, atop a stage washed in purple and yellow lights, six sex symbols shimmied and gyrated to a pulsing disco beat. Dressed in skintight costumes that left little to the imagination, they not only danced, they belted out tunes. But these seductive performers weren't Centerfolds — they were the Village People, and they had brought their act to the hottest home in America.

...

It was the fall of 1979, and disco had reached its climax. Gloria Gaynor had released the splendid empowerment anthem "I Will Survive" the previous year, and Rod Stewart had the world asking, "Da Ya Think I'm Sexy?" Donna Summer was on top of the charts, Diana Ross, Sister Sledge and Chic were churning out indelible slices of sparkling dance music. And the Village People were at the height of their stardom.

It made sense, then, that when Hugh Hefner decided to throw a roller-disco pajama party on the posh grounds of the Playboy Mansion, the Village People would be tapped as the night's musical guests.

Watching the bash, taped in October 1979 and aired the following month as an ABC prime-time special, feels like taking a madcap trip through a forgotten bit of Playboy history. Guests included a skate-happy James Caan, a tennis-playing Cheryl Tiegs and a smiling Patty Hearst.

Hosted by the dashing Richard Dawson, the event was billed as a "wild all-night party of music, laughter and roller disco." Naturally the camera gravitated toward the bevy of sun-kissed models that descended on the Mansion grounds during the first portion of the show, with long stretches of screen time dedicated to shots of scantily clad women dancing on skates or frolicking in the Grotto. Although the Village People were the main attraction, other entertainers also performed: Chuck Mangione was there to play the flugelhorn, and Wayland Flowers's rowdy puppet Madame delivered unmannerly zingers throughout the program. Video footage of Playmate photo shoots — nothing too revealing for the ABC presentation — was also incorporated into the show.

Jazz, jokes and feminine beauty — standard fare for PLAYBOY. ("When Hef throws a party, he really throws a party," Dawson says in one bit, paying more attention to the bikini-clad models than to the camera.)

But it is the Village People, grinding and slinking alongside Playmates as they perform two songs in the heart of hetero America, who steal the show. Considering the group was created foremost for men who found nirvana in gay clubs and certainly

not in the world of Playboy, the irony almost astonishes.

...

At the Playboy Mansion, eroticism and escapism coalesced to create an exhilarating fantasy land. Disco music had the power to harness those same forces and achieve exactly the same thing. Hugh Hefner and the Village People didn't target identical audiences, but they both created and catered to male fantasies.

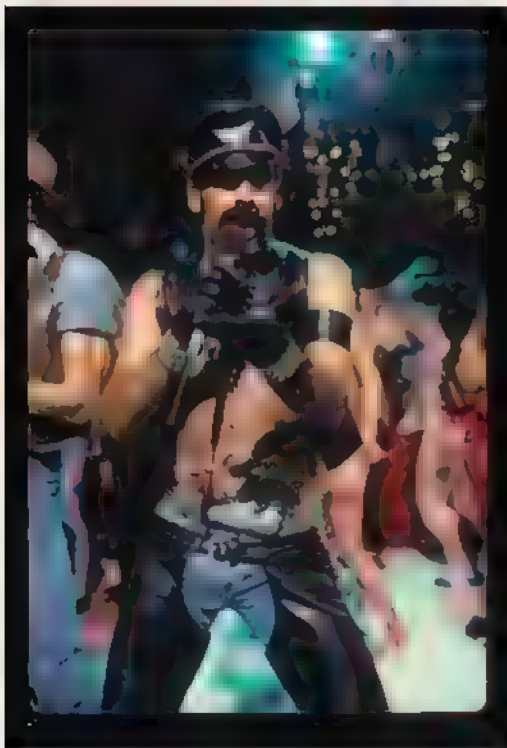
Everything about the Village People, from their image exaggerated versions of masculine tropes to the catchy, coded songs they recorded, was crafted through a queer lens. As the group's co-founder and manager Jacques Morali told *Rolling Stone* in 1978 about his motivation for creating the disco act, "Gay people have no [musical group] ...nobody to personalize the gay people, you know?"

Arriving at the dawn of the 1970s, disco helped define a time of emerging liberation for LGBTQ America. After decades of suppression and erasure, the 1969 Stonewall riots and the gay civil rights movement had ushered in an era of relative openness among queer people. And the sleek, blissful grooves emanating from the disco scene provided a ubiquitous soundtrack at gay clubs across the country — safe havens where men could feel free to explore their sexuality.

As the story goes, it was a gay club in Greenwich Village that sparked the vision for the Village People, a group concept conceived by Morali and his business partner, Henri Belolo. Casablanca Records signed off on the project even before the producers began to recruit members, outside of singer Victor Willis.

Although disco was the rage among gay men, it was a genre dominated by female vocalists. Morali and Belolo, French immigrants looking to cash in on this latest American music craze, shrewdly saw a niche that had yet to be exploited and cobbled together a group to attract a gay male audience. Appropriating straight American masculinity served a dual purpose: Morali knew that strong male images — a cowboy, Native American, cop, soldier (or sailor), construction worker, biker — would titillate gay men and appeal to a broader (straighter) audience unable to decipher the gay innuendoes and double entendres sprinkled throughout the music. Although, as John Rockwell wrote in *The New York Times* in 1979, "those in the know (any five-year-old with a brain) can pick up on their homosexual subtexts."

The Village People's 1977 self-titled debut was so specifically gay, with songs about queer meccas such as San Francisco and



Opening page: The 1979 Village People lineup - Randy Jones, David Hodo, Glenn Hughes, Victor Willis, Alex Briley, and Felipe Ruse - as photographed for a PLAYBOY article on audio tech. Top: Rose performs at the taping of the Playboy Roller Disco and Pajama Party. Above: Leutherman 'character' Hughes - one of Wayland Flowers's puppets teased him during the program. "You Village People are my kind of people - tacky!" Right: The group gets its groove on dancing with the crowd in the Playboy Mansion's Great Hall.

Fire Island, that member David Hodo (the construction worker) once described it as “possibly the gayest album ever.” With their beefcake physiques, accentuated by costumes that displayed their bulging muscles, the Village People toyed with fantasy images to establish themselves as gay sex symbols – even if not every member identified as queer. They presented ideals that gay men could aspire to – the type of men they wanted to be, and the type of men they desired. *The Advocate*, the oldest gay magazine in America, declared the group “a godsend.”

By 1979, the Village People were in their prime. The sextet had become a global phenomenon after the campy “Y.M.C.A.” exploded on the pop charts, taking the group from a gay clubcircuit staple to an international crossover act in high demand. They toured North America, “Y.M.C.A.” went to number one in multiple countries, and a \$20 million musical comedy featuring their songs (*Can’t Stop the Music*, a Razzie-award-winning flop) was released in June 1980. The Village People had become one of the hottest acts on the planet.

But then the group began to reverse course and rewrite their own narrative. Once open about the performers’ sexual identities, by 1980, Morah was downplaying their sexuality.

“Look, the Village People is the only group that is black, white, straight and gay,” Morah told *PLAYBOY* in a 1980 article in which he attempted to distance the group from any queer subtext. “They are successful because they represent many sides of America, because they are fun and sing happy songs,” he said. “They are very much gay-influenced... But they are not a gay group. To say this will kill them!”

To Morah, a gay man, it might have seemed that the group’s commercial survival hung in the balance. Instead of pushing the cultural visibility of a marginalized community, he wanted to

HUGH HEFNER AND THE VILLAGE PEOPLE DIDN’T TARGET THE SAME AUDIENCES, BUT BOTH CREATED - AND CATERED TO - MALE FANTASIES.

focus on appealing to the masses. The move was disappointing and startling, after all, the Village People’s disco act had broken ground, achieving mainstream success without toning down their queer image – perhaps, in fact, by playing it up. But as their biggest hit, “Y.M.C.A.,” ostensibly a paean to gay cruising, was being sung and danced to the world over, the group was pivoting away from fully claiming queerness.

The sanitization did not go unnoticed. “In order to get themselves on the Macy’s float... and in the hope of getting their image slapped onto kids’ lunch boxes, [the Village People] went along with the sexlessness that seems a precondition of gay male representation in pop culture,” writes Alice Echols, historian and self-proclaimed “discologist,” in her 2010 book *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*.

...

Yet at the Playboy Mansion in 1979, the Village People and their





Top: The Village People performed two songs for Playboy's *Roller Disco* and *Pajama Party*. "Rock and Roll Is Back Again" and "Ready for the '80s" both off their 1979 *Live and Sleazy* album. **Above:** Macho men in action at the Mansion.

disco-fevered audience stood on the brink of monumental shifts that would forever change American culture. The death of disco at the turn of the 1980s gave way to dark years marked by Reaganomics, a devastating war on drugs and an AIDS epidemic that ravaged the same gay Edens the Village People sang about. It would be decades before a new era dawned for queer America. Today, medical advances have largely eradicated HIV's status as a death sentence; gay couples can walk down the aisle and adopt children, trans rights are at the forefront of a national movement. Queer culture has permeated the mainstream, and artists no longer feel the same pressure to stifle their sexuality in order to grow their careers.

Perhaps Morali and the Village People could not have foreseen this moment, one in which equality is closer at hand than ever before—and one in which the group's songs endure, beloved and enshrined in our musical history. But on that night 40 years ago, a leather daddy subversively sang to America about casual gay sex with a wink and a nod toward freedom. And Playboy was happy to host. ■

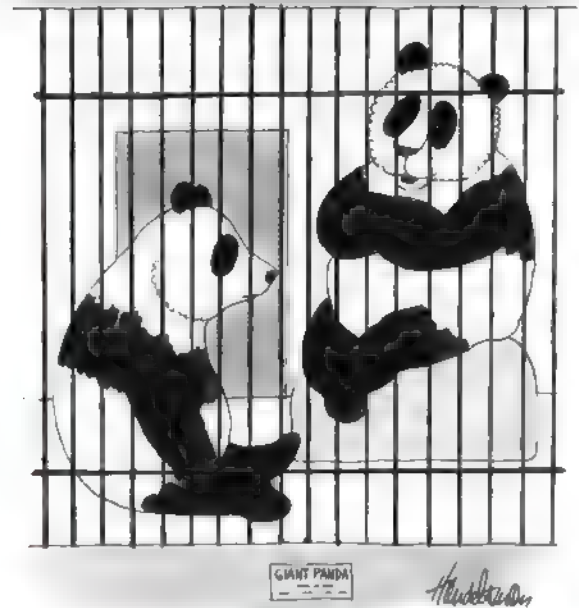


"If you're a fan of business, I think you're really going to enjoy pleasure."

CLASSIC



"Well...uh...no, your Eminence...it's not exactly a flying machine."



"If, as you say, it's no crime to be a panda, perhaps you can explain why we were arrested."



"Naughty girl!... Have you been peeking?"



"I think we should be getting back before we're missed."

CARTOONS



"Hear me, and hear me good, kid. Unroll the condom all the way to the base of the erect penis, taking care to expel the air from the reservoir at the tip by squeezing between the forefinger and thumb."



"Look at the corner apartment on the 12th floor. That's what I want you to do to me."



"This evening's program consists of Brahms, Mozart, Strauss and a rap piece commissioned for this occasion."



"I have to leave before midnight, but I have time for a quickie"



Fierce and
Fabulous

Cristal

Model @Cristal_playboy_official

Photographers Mike Cohen | @mikecohenphotos







Could you tell us a bit about yourself?

I never dreamt that one day I would be in Playboy, it's a blessing. It's like a fairy tale, how an ordinary girl from a small town in Poland, who had to overcome many hardships throughout her life, ends up on the cover of Playboy. My biggest dream has come true. This is my second Playboy invitation and I feel so special. Has helped me believe in myself even more. It has given me a lot of hope and belief that everything is possible and the world is waiting for me. An unforgettable experience that I will remember for the rest of my life. Thank you

Can you give us a background on your career and where it all started?

My career started completely by accident like all the best things in my life. I just think it's because I have a good heart and God rewarded me for all my good deeds.

What's one thing you've learned about yourself?

I am a very patient and hard-working person. My life experiences have taught me humility and respect for life and other people but also ambition that I am able to achieve a lot in life and every time I set the bar higher and higher for me nothing is impossible, everything is reachable. To achieve it is only a matter of time.

What is the biggest misconception people have about you?

The biggest problem is that people judge me like a book by its cover, they treat me stereotypically, but then during the conversation, they quickly change their minds about me, they are positively surprised that beauty is not only about appearance but above all, a beautiful heart. I believe that if we have beautiful souls it makes us beautiful on the outside.

Do you have any hidden talents, if so what is it?

I love helping others, this is the meaning of my life, especially for children with autism and Tourette's. Thanks to hard work, I managed to create my own cosmetic brand. I design my own perfume scents, and all this in order to establish a Foundation for children with Tourette's syndrome. It's a cause close to my heart.



for certain reasons. My greatest dream is to complete a biography about my life. It was not a bed of roses with many tears and sacrifices. It will include my memories and motivate people to never give up and have faith the sun always comes after the storm.

In what ways do you use your platform to inspire or influence others?

I encourage people to live a healthy lifestyle, consume and use natural products, I motivate people to work hard and help others, I want to teach respect for others, mutual help and support, not to be racist and not to treat people because of the color of their skin or religion because we are all the same. As above before, by not judging people by their cover to support and help each other and not to be jealous and selfish. Every day try to be the best version of yourself and treat others how you would like to be treated.

What message do you hope to convey through your work?

As above before, by not judging people by their cover to support and help each other and not be jealous and selfish. Every day try to be the best version of yourself and treat others how you would like to be treated. Be your natural self don't try to change under the pressure of others. Even if stones land on your face every day, be strong and fight adversity, think positively. I am the best example that the impossible is possible.

How do you prepare mentally and physically for a big photoshoot or event?

I take care of myself every day. I eat healthily. I use natural cosmetics so it doesn't make much difference to me. I don't use any special rituals. Sometimes I allow myself a bit of

luxury in the form of a bath by candlelight.

When you're not working, what helps you decompress and relax?

In my free time, I book a flight and catch some fun sun rays. I read cognitive and philosophical lectures, for example, Eckhart Tolle, I forgot about the things going on in the world. I like unplanned spontaneous trips best. My passion is Nordic Walking, I love outdoor activities,

parks, woodlands, and fields, preferably outside the city. Contact with animals, deer, birds, and dogs is important for true relaxation in my body and spirit.

What's the strangest fan encounter you've ever had?

Strangers ask me for photos all the time.... In elevators, airports, and even taxi drivers, both men and women. Once a gentleman was trying to take a selfie with me on the escalator in the Dubai Mall! He then fell into the fountain. In Istanbul airport, A policeman was so struck by my presence and long blonde hair that he took me to a special inspection room just to get my phone number. I'm always polite to everyone I meet.

What's your go-to guilty pleasure snack?

Mmm... I'm dreaming now about frozen yogurt with fruit and pistachio sauce is divine. I go for long Nordic walks so I can eat what I want.

Thanks for taking the time to speak to us, do you have any last words or advice for our readers?

Be your natural self don't try to change under the pressure of others. Even if stones land on your face every day, be strong and fight adversity, think positively. I am the best example that the impossible is possible. In moments of failure, don't waste time analyzing your mistakes. They are your lesson for a better future. Take a tough time to find a solution. Be brave and try hard. If you don't try you won't drink champagne. Stay strong and believe yourself and your dreams will come true. Thank you for spending this time getting to know me. Always sending you Love and best wishes.







t h i s i s

y o u r

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p h o r i a

Neuroaesthetics sets out to understand what the human mind deems beautiful. Can we trust this new experimental field of science — and the corporations wielding it?

BY **DAISY ALIOTO**

Imagine waking up in an apartment expertly curated by a voice-controlled intelligent personal assistant. Everything from the artwork on the walls to the cutlery in the kitchen has been selected based on what your brain perceives to be most beautiful. The lighting is custom designed. It soothes you by appealing to Homo sapiens' earliest evolutionary memories: the tranquil hues of a savanna at sunrise. You are surrounded by verdant plants, of course, because humans find plants calming.

You walk into the bathroom and call up a playlist through a smart speaker that produces the crispest notes and zero white noise. The tunes excite you and prepare you for a productive day, and every time a new song plays, the reward center in your brain lights up. Your apartment's smart speakers also tell you when to eat breakfast; your refrigerator is stocked with healthy meals that have been exquisitely plated and chemically hacked to derive the same response.

You scroll through a dating app that has already selected candidates based on the physical features a brain-imaging study determined you find most attractive.

Your virtual assistant records the space 24/7 to help you tweak your environment. It tells you when to reposition the chairs to increase the room's feng shui. It tells you what you find interesting, what your brain finds beautiful, what is art.

Is this science fiction, or is life by design and hyperaesthetic curation a slightly exaggerated version of now? The term aesthetic, Greek in origin, entered the English language in the 1700s as philosophers grappled with how humans evaluate both beauty and art. As the field of psychology evolved, its tenets and the philosophical principles of *aesthetics* increasingly intertwined. When scientific understanding of the brain advanced — as when imaging technology allowed neuroscientists to observe brain activity — psychology and aesthetics were roiled. Suddenly, every human emotion had the potential to be triggered, mapped and recorded as data.

In 1999, neuroscientist Semir Zeki coined the term *neuroaesthetics*, launching a new field of inquiry into the

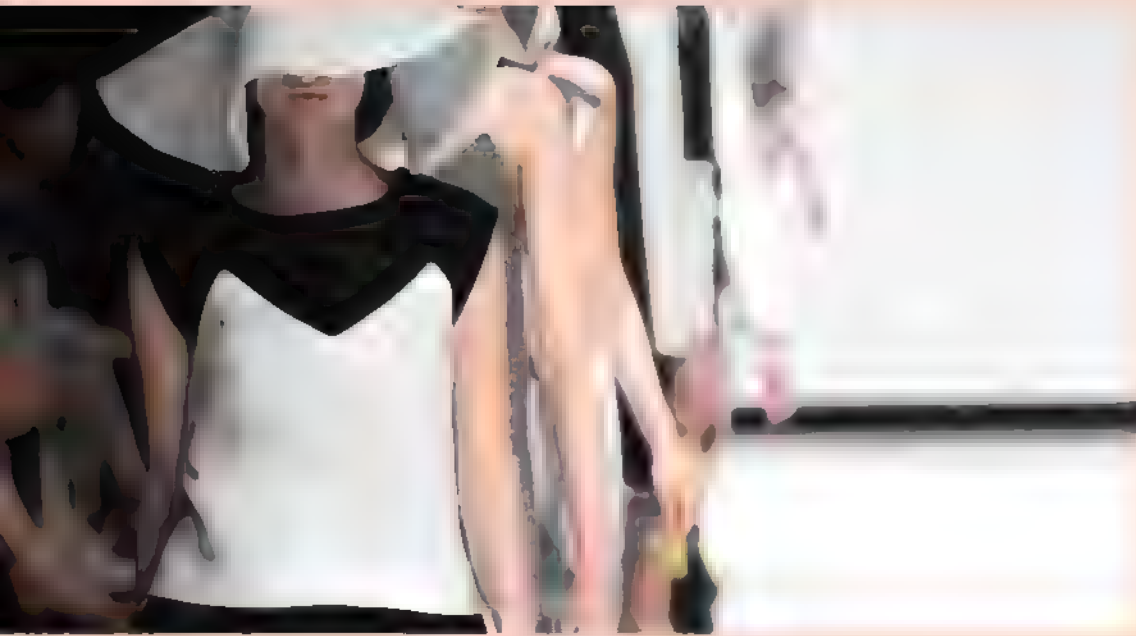
connections between science and art. In the information age, the study of neuro aesthetics has boomed as academics apply what we know about the brain to centuries-old questions about how humans process beauty. Normally, the birth of a new academic discipline is cause for celebration — but some question the legitimacy of this nascent field.

"To suggest that the human brain responds in a particular way to art risks creating criteria of right or wrong," wrote Philip Ball, a celebrated science journalist and longtime *Nature* editor, in 2013. Another critique comes from philosopher Alva Noë, who argued in a 2011 *New York Times* op-ed, "Neuroscience, which looks at events in the brains of individual people and can do no more than describe and analyze them, may just be the wrong kind of empirical science for understanding art."

As the forefather of neuroaesthetics, Zeki hit back: "You will never have a complete theory of aesthetics unless you take account of the organ through which you have the aesthetic experience."

Let's take a step back and review the organ in question. We know that "our brains do not have a dedicated aesthetic or art module," says neuroscientist Anjan Chatterjee, director of the Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics as well as ChatLab, which sets out to "explore beauty, language, cognition and the brain." Rather, any aesthetic experience we have relies on a range of information collected by multiple senses.

A model developed by Chatterjee posits that the way we experience aesthetics is three-pronged: sensory, emotional and cognitive. When we see an object, the image of that object travels from our eyes to our brain's occipital lobes. This is the sensory response. Our emotional response occurs in the limbic areas of the brain, where the pleasure or reward centers are located. The cognitive response occurs partly in our temporal lobe as we contextualize the object within our stores of memory and knowledge. Education, culture and language all have an impact on the way we perceive and evaluate any one object. These parts of the brain are some of the same structures that regulate our enjoyment of food and sex. And yet evolutionary



Left: Milan Design Week has become a gathering of companies that use neuroaesthetics to create immersive brand experiences, such as the Lexus installation *Lead with Light*, produced with design firm Rhizomatiks

theory can't fully explain what we deem beautiful or why.

That brings us to what we *don't* know about the brain. "The principles of mapping elemental and visual properties such as shape, color, movement and location onto their emotional tones have yet to be worked out," Chatterjee writes in his book *The Aesthetic Brain*. Despite the ability of brain imaging to peer inside our heads and assign data points to our brain's chemistry, "any kind of neuro-imaging study is very simplistic, really taking only one kind of task and acquiring some images of brain activity," says Martin Skov, a researcher with the Danish Research Centre for Magnetic Resonance. "The depressing way that neuroscience works is that you can form a picture of what happens only if you have a lot of studies you can pull together." In other words, neuroscience isn't capable of perceiving the subjective meanings (or the universal meaning) in individual objects or works of art.

And yet, many neuroscientists like to say that beauty isn't in the eye of the beholder, it's in the brain. If you talk to them long enough, however, they'll revise that statement. Indeed, every aesthetic experience we have is perceived with our entire body. "Your brain is not really for understanding art. The brain is for regulating metabolism and things that keep you alive," Skov says.

In addition to the sensory, emotional and cognitive responses happening inside the brain, the current state of the body is also crucial. Is the body cold? Is it hungry? This information doesn't show up on an fMRI.

"When you talk with people outside neuroscience, they can get quite annoyed that this is the criticism at the moment," says Skov. A designer recently approached him, wanting to know what color to paint hospital rooms to ease patient recovery. As Skov relayed to the designer, "It's not possible to predict on an individual basis how the individual person will respond to the same stimulus." It isn't sexy, but that's the scientific reality.

That doesn't mean we'll never be able to predict which environments the human brain prefers. "Studies indicate that aesthetic qualities of architecture have an impact on our mood, cognitive functioning, behavior and even mental health," states

"Buildings, Beauty, and the Brain: A Neuroscience of Architectural Experience," a 2017 white paper co-authored by Chatterjee. A 2015 study found that open rooms and rooms with higher ceilings are more likely to be judged as beautiful. A different study suggests that curvilinear spaces encourage cooperation among people. Another one investigated the ability of some buildings to induce a meditative or contemplative effect. These studies are based on subjects viewing 2D images. Neuroscientists suggest that the study of 3D spaces will require even more refined scientific methods to filter out irrelevant factors.

You might think neuroaesthetics would avoid the tendency of new sciences to breach the popular culture as fact, but it's already happening. You may have heard that potted plants make apartment residents happier. This is part of the "biophilia hypothesis," and it's just that—a hypothesis. A 2011 paper coauthored by Chatterjee discusses "the hold that neuroscience has on the public imagination." Much as the wellness industry now slaps such buzzwords as *green*, *organic* and *sustainable* on products, marketers have taken the prefix *neuro* and run with it. Think of the Neuro line of energy drinks (one flavor, Bliss, promises its "neural-focused nutrients" will reduce stress) or software programs for patients with dementia. "Brain-fitness programs are examples of products designed with plausible scientific rationales," the paper states. "However, in these cases, commerce has moved ahead of the science. The marketing of these products often exaggerates or misrepresents the science motivating their production."

It's not only marketers who are gathering inspiration from the burgeoning field of neuroaesthetics, members of the traditional humanities have also played with its underlying principles. Ani Liu is an "experimental artist" and winner of this year's Princeton Arts Fellowship. Her work "examines the reciprocal relationships between science, technology and their influence on human subjectivity, culture and identity." This includes projects such as *Affective Induction Spa: Experiments in Programmed Emotions*, in which an art collective from the Massachusetts

Right: In March, online beauty brand Glossier opened a pop-up retail experience in Miami inspired by the city's Art Deco Historic District and featuring a mural by artist and mental health advocate Jacquie Comrie.



Above: The Museum of Dream Space, which bills itself as the "first digital art museum," opened in Los Angeles this year. Inspired by Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Mirror Rooms, it's an example of experiential art merged with commerce.

"I don't think we can predict that people will use this kind of information in a completely ethical way."

Institute of Technology "used findings from science to induce emotional experiences of pleasure and happiness" in visitors at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Some were given a boneconduction sound massage, while others were tickled with feathers by students in lab coats.

Liu is open about the purely representative nature of this "experiment"; it's primarily meant to spur conversation about the possibilities of the field. "I think the placebo effect in and of itself was the most informative one. As soon as you sit down and we tell you this is scientific-induced happiness, you're already in a really happy mood," she says.

By comparison, Booker Prize – winning novelist A.S. Byatt was criticized for a 2006 piece in *The Times Literary Supplement* detailing her neuro-reading of John Donne's poetry. Chris Power, a literary critic at *The Guardian*, disparaged Byatt's theory that "Donne's poems are so easy to memorize because of his unusual way with syntax," which appeals to readers on a neural level. This "seems like the next ride in cultural theory's funfair of scientific misappropriation," Power wrote. Philosopher, poet and cultural critic Raymond Tallis was more blunt: "I find it impossible to make neuroscientific sense of this."

At the 2019 Milan Furniture Fair, Google and architect Suchi Reddy created an installation that examined visitors' experiences of built environments. According to a report in *Fast Company*, visitors wore bands with sensors that measured their biological responses to various room designs. Using an algorithm developed with Johns Hopkins University's Arts + Mind Lab ("a research-to-practice initiative for accelerating the field of neuroaesthetics") to graphically render biometric data such as heart rate and skin temperature, the creators were able to present participants with colorful postcards indicating which parts of the structure they found most appealing. But the technology around this is no more precise than photographs purporting to capture your aura.

Google's interest in neuroaesthetics raises ethical questions about the field's future applications being wielded by technology giants that traffic in data. The concerns are rooted in the rise of brain branding, or the use of neuroscience and neuroscientific data to design and sell products — a sort of commercialized hacking of the brain.

"I don't even like the word *neuroaesthetics*; I prefer the phrase *cognitive neuroscience of aesthetics*, because it has

turned into this brand for just selling stuff that seems to be scientific but is really pseudoscientific,” says psychologist Marcos Nadal. “It’s generally used to give a scientific gloss to any statement that anybody cares to mention about nature, design, buildings or art.”

Of note, there are now “neuroaesthetics consultants.” I ask Nadal about the handouts from the installation in Milan. “I think it’s as harmful or harmless as giving people flawed psychological reports on their personality,” he says, or giving Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality tests to MBA students, which more psychologists have of late declared useless.

In 2008, a company called Mindlab International tracked customers’ brain activity as they shopped at a T.J. Maxx store. According to *Business of Fashion*, the company found “significant increase in brain activity” when discounted designer labels were discovered among nonluxury brands. “Armed with this information, T.J. Maxx could design its store layout to maximise this ‘treasure hunt’ effect and attempt to trigger more moments of positive, purchase-inducing feelings,” the article concludes. A design research collaboration called Acclair Art Valuation Service proposes to upend the art market by assigning a “neuro-value” to artwork as determined by a viewer’s brain response.



Above: Bulgari partnered with Argentinian artist Tomás Saraceno for this Milan Design Week installation. Channeling neuroaesthetics, the piece explores “the connection between design, science and art.”



Left: Aura photography, also known as Kirlian photography, can be traced to the 1930s but has become mainstream in the Instagram era. This photo is provided by Auradome, which “offers explorations of energy and color.”

It’s not hard to foresee a scenario in which simply the promise of neuroaesthetic insight will be enough to get customers through the door. Companies can mine customers data while simultaneously marketing to them. The transition from baiting consumers with Insta-genic environments to running actual lab studies is so seamless as to be unnoticed by most people. We’re already primed to partake in these schemes as companies woo visitors to colorful pop-up “museums” or meditation retreats where every experience is sponsored by a wellness brand. Some already collect data — at Color Factory, visitors receive a QR-coded card that tracks the selfies they take in the environment — but they’re brands with a limited marketing agenda. Unlike Google, they don’t already hold the keys to our online identities. I asked each of the academics I interviewed this question: What would happen if companies used the allure of neuroaesthetics to learn more about customers than customers knew themselves?

“To my knowledge, nobody [in academia] is asking that,” Chatterjee says.

Adds Skov, “I don’t think we can predict that people will use this kind of information in a wholly, completely ethically sound way.”

You wake up in an apartment that has been expertly curated by an intelligent personal assistant. Everything from the artwork on the walls to the cutlery in the kitchen has been selected by companies based on what they think your brain perceives to be most beautiful. You’ve been sold a life of pleasure. Are you happy? ■

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